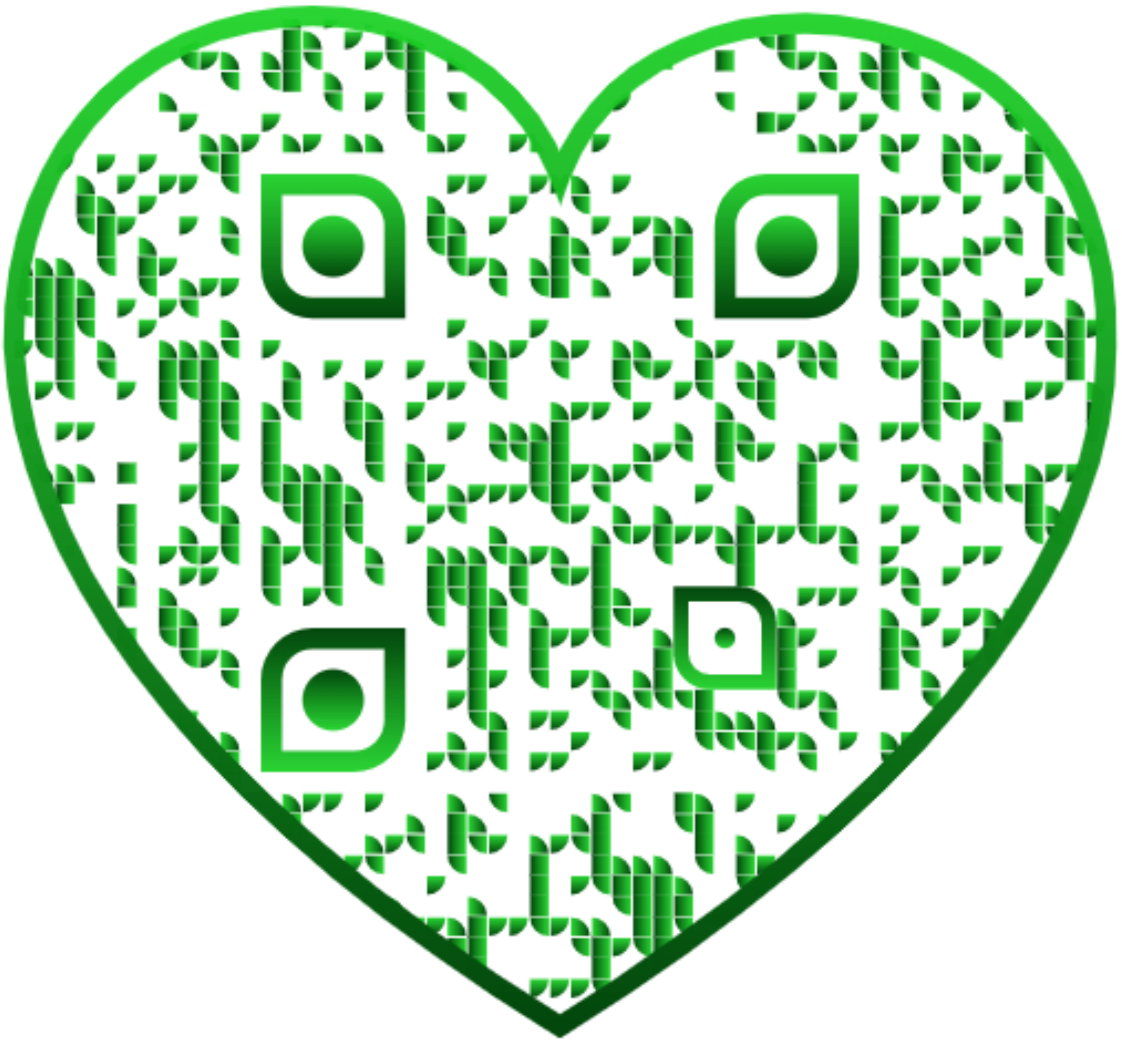
CHARLES RIVER EDITORS

The Achaemenid Persian Empire's Most Famous Kings

The Lives and Reigns of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, and Xerxes I



The Achaemenid Persian Empire's Most Famous Kings: The Lives and Reigns of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, and Xerxes I

By Charles River Editors

A. Davey's picture of a relief depicting Xerxes on his tomb

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Introduction

A relief depicting a Persian king killing a Greek hoplite

"I am Cyrus the king, an Achaemenian." – An inscription found at the Persian capital of Pasargadae

At one point in antiquity, the Achaemenid Persian Empire was the largest empire the world had ever seen, but aside from its role in the Greco-Persian Wars and its collapse at the hands of Alexander the Great, it has been mostly overlooked. When it has been studied, the historical sources have mostly been Greek, the very people the Persians sought to conquer. Needless to say, their versions were biased.

It was not until excavations in the region during the 20th century that many of the relics, reliefs, and clay tablets that offer so much information about Persian life could be studied for the first time. Through archaeological remains, ancient texts, and work by a new generation of historians, a picture can today be built of this remarkable civilization and their most famous leaders.

When considering this empire’s rulers, the two most often referenced are

Xerxes, the leader of the Persian invasion of Greece which caused the heroic sacrifice of the Spartans and their allies at Thermopylae, or Cyrus the Great, the man who created the empire. While he was one of the most influential men in the ancient world, research on Cyrus the Great is simultaneously fascinating and frustrating. The Persians' ancestors did not write (in fact, in their epic poems and myths, they claim that it was something taught to man by demons and therefore something to be avoided), and though the Iranians had taken up writing in their governmental and administrative functions by the time Cyrus lived, the kings still did not learn to write. Put simply, it was considered a functional skill, but not of the greatest importance.

As a result, while plenty of ancient sources mention the great Persian king, Persian sources themselves are rare, and those sources that do exist, such as the Babylonian Chronicle, are largely dry and state only the basic facts and large events. By contrast, Greek sources about Cyrus embrace the artistic aspect of their work so highly that the accuracy often comes into question, and sometimes deep scrutiny is necessary to attempt to separate the fact from the fiction. In the end, the full truth about Cyrus and his reign may never be truly understood.

Of course, this reality has deepened the mystique that surrounds Cyrus even to this day, and it has elevated his status from conqueror and king to enlightened humanist monarch and ideal ruler. In fact, a modern misconception based on the Cyrus Cylinder has labeled him the first proponent of civil rights, though this is somewhat of an exaggeration. The argument hinges on the Cylinder being a unique artifact in listing the ideology by which Cyrus intended to rule, but it equally ignores the fact that such declarations were commonplace among kings of the ancient Near East and more a tool of monarchal propaganda than a sweeping declaration of human rights.

That said, Cyrus was a fair and rational leader, particularly compared to the many brutal kings and warlords of ancient times. The high praise he received, even from his enemies, must certainly not be dismissed, and the admiration directed toward him came from many other exceptional individuals, including Alexander the Great, a bitter enemy of the empire Cyrus founded. Whatever the underlying issues, the incredible achievements of Cyrus

distinguish him as one of the greatest kings in history, and his life, conquests, reforms, and rule continue to be of great interest over 2,500 years later.

Darius I took the throne after the death of Cyrus's son, Cambyses II, and though his reign would not have been possible without the construction of the empire and the administrative groundwork laid by Cyrus the Great before him, Darius proved himself just as worthy of the epithet. Reigning for over 35 years, Darius kept control of the massive Persian Empire despite numerous rebellions and uprisings, and he also managed to implement reforms and improvements that established the empire's golden age. He followed the example of Cyrus before him in his foreign policy and mode of kingship as well, offering tolerance and patience to various cultures and religions, and even treating his enemies fairly in most cases.

Perhaps his ultimate success can be seen most clearly in the passage of power at the end of his life. By that time, his reign had been long and stable, and though he died of illness somewhat unexpectedly, his kingdom was still so firmly established that the kingship passed to his son Xerxes without any question or upheaval. Under Darius the Great's rule, the empire reached its greatest extent, stretching from the Indus Valley and Central Asia in the east to Libya and the Danube River in the west.

Xerxes remains one of the most famous rulers in history because he led the Second Persian War against the Greeks. That war was a veritable clash of civilizations, and had the Persians triumphed, Classical Athens would have been snuffed out and Greece would never have formed the backbone of Roman and Western culture. Simply put, the West as it is today might never have existed.

Not surprisingly, the majority of surviving sources regarding Xerxes are the product of Greek writers, so it was inevitable that the Persian king has been depicted in unflattering terms for thousands of years. The details of his invasion of Greece cast him as the villain in the dramatic Greek retelling of the tragic 300 Spartans holding the pass at Thermopylae, and focus on the loss at Salamis solidified his reputation as a failure despite another 15 years of successful rule after withdrawing from the Greek mainland. Although Herodotus's *Histories* offer a less biased account than some later sources, he still depicted Xerxes as a figure of tragic failings, listening too often to the

wrong councilors and eventually collapsing on the weight of his own hubris. This classic appearance as a tragic hero figure gives some pause for doubt, as the literary stereotype is almost too perfect and suggests a lack of depth and nuance that characterizes all accurate investigations of historical individuals.

These early images were only exacerbated by Alexander the Great and his biographers, who maintained a fiery hatred toward Xerxes for his burning of Athens. They targeted many of his building projects after their capture of Persepolis, and they pushed an even bleaker picture of the king, one of an idle, indolent, cowardly, and corrupt ruler. The continuation of this can be traced throughout the passing centuries - Plato considered Xerxes to be a poor reflection of a great father, and another contemporary, Lysias, wrote in his Funeral Oration how Xerxes "had held Greece in contempt, but had been deceived in his hopes, who was dishonored by the event, galled by the disaster, and angered against its authors, and who was unused to ill-hap and unacquainted with true men."

Later, a story was recorded by Cicero that "Xerxes, who was laden with all the gifts and prizes of fortune, was not contented with his cavalry, his mass of infantry, the multitude of his ships or the infinite weight of his gold, but offered a prize for the man who could invent a new pleasure; yet even with this he was not satisfied; in fact, desire will never reach an end." Sir Walter Raleigh wrote a *History of the World* in which, despite including an anecdote in which Alexander considered re-erecting a statue of Xerxes due to the king's virtues, he went on to describe Xerxes as impious, brutal, wicked, foolish, cowardly, and merciless. Author Henry Rawlinson, writing in 1867, claimed that Xerxes's character was far inferior to his more admirable predecessors, while David Stronach asserted in 1978 that Xerxes was significantly less intelligent than his father had been.

In recent decades, the rise of other forms of media has continued the savage portrayal of Xerxes, usually due to the excitement of the Battle of Thermopylae and the opportunities for storytellers to sell an underdog tale. In the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans*, Xerxes is shown as a cruel, power-hungry, unbalanced tyrant with no capabilities as a military leader. Several decades later, Zack Snyder made the Spartans famous with huge muscles and lots of slow motion in his adaptation of a graphic novel, both titled *300*. True to its

exaggerated style, the Xerxes of this film was an unrealistically tall, sex-crazed, sadistic psychopath with delusions of divinity despite the fact that Persian kings were not actually considered to be gods, even by their own people.

As usual, the truth lies far more towards the middle, even as Xerxes's frequent portrayal as the villain in the story of a fierce, brave defense of Greece against overwhelming odds has made him a less than popular subject for biographers and historical investigations. However, a few individuals have undertaken to explore the true complexities of his character, and through these works and a few ancient sources, most particularly Herodotus, a more accurate picture can be derived, even if the bias of Greek accounts still colors the information. In reality, very little objective information exists as to the personality and character of the king, so the truth must be estimated through a careful interpretation of his deeds.

The Achaemenid Persian Empire's Most Famous Kings: The Lives and Reigns of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, and Xerxes I looks at the lives of the Persian rulers who brought the empire to the peak of its power. Along with pictures depicting important people, places, and events, you will learn about Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes like never before.

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The Persians and the Medes

Long before Cyrus began his conquest of the ancient world, the Iranian Plateau did not even house the people who would come to be known as Persians and Medes. Very little archeological evidence has been found that traces their migration, but studies focusing on linguistic evolution suggest that the Persians and Medes originated as part of a group of Indo-Iranians from Central Asia. Around the beginning of the 2nd millennium BCE, these Indo-Iranians began to move east, eventually splitting into different groups. One headed south into India, and the other proceeded to the Iranian Plateau, where they split yet again into the Bactrians and Sogdians, the Areians, Drangians, and Arachosians, and the Medes and Persians, the ancestors of Cyrus.

Settling in the western regions of Mesopotamia, they initially lived a nomadic lifestyle dependent on the protection and feeding of their livestock herds. Cattle provided them with food, and horses offered transportation and advantages in warfare, so it's little surprise that they favored chariots in battle. A burial site in Central Asia of ancient Indo-Iranian origins has yielded one of the oldest chariots yet discovered, dating to around 2000 BCE Already by around 1200-1000 BCE, they had developed a riding cavalry as well. Being supremely important to the people, cows and particularly horses also served as the most common animal sacrifices in early religious practices.

Society was divided into priests, warriors, and herders. Priests ruled in the earliest decades, but soon, as can often occur when societies clash with other outsiders, the warriors rose to prominence as the central decision-makers, though priests still remained vitally important to the organization of the societies. Religion to the early Persians and Medes paralleled that of other early nomadic societies, with deities being associated with various forces of nature that both ruled and could ruin their existences.[1]

Also in keeping with the tendencies of many varied nomadic cultures, these early Persians and Medes had little interest in keeping written history of their exploits, and archeological evidence from that far back has largely been lost or destroyed with the rise and fall of other civilizations. However, it can be safely assumed that the Indo-Iranian migration was not a fully peaceful integration. The lands around Mesopotamia and the Iranian Plateau were

hardly uninhabited, so the incoming Persians and Medes most certainly engaged in wars to drive out the other native groups already controlling access to key water points. Several of these struggles are likely referenced in metaphors through the myths of the Indo-Iranian invaders, which speak of heroes and warriors facing down demons and monsters.[2]

The area was also not only inhabited by other nomadic tribes competing for use of the oases. In fact, it also housed many of the oldest and most developed civilizations of the ancient world, such as that of Elam, centered on the city of Susa. Further west was the great city of Babylon in Mesopotamia. These large civilizations created a far greater blockage for the movement of the Iranian people, who were incapable of a military victory and thus settled just west of the great civilizations, living peacefully alongside the existing nations, learning to cultivate crops and maintain a stationary society through agriculture, and often integrating with the larger nations by serving as mercenaries in their armies.

Abandoning the nomadic roots of the migration meant that the Indo-Iranian settlers split into several different areas and new individual nations arose from them. As time passed and each grew more distinct, wars increased between the new states as the most powerful families of each group strove for even greater power and wealth. In the process, they established themselves as nobility, and another concept began to evolve in this era which bears similarities to a “divine right” of rule. Among the Iranian states, it was a more warlike divinity, indicative of their lifestyle. This was something called the Farnah, roughly translated to mean “Royal Glory,” a divine blessing from the war god Verethragna that ensured fortune to the warrior. As a result, great success on the battlefield enjoyed by a general or conqueror became in itself proof of a divine favor that validated that warrior’s rule over others.[3]

The first mention of the Persians comes from an inscription by Assyrian King Shalmaneser III on his Black Obelisk. Dating to around 834 BCE, the text mentions that he invaded the “land of Parsua,” and 200 years later, the word had modified slightly to “Parsa,” derivations of which in Greek led to the English word Persia today. This group of Persians occupied areas in Iran, just west of Mesopotamia, while the Medes stayed further east, mainly centralized in what is now modern-day Kurdistan.[4]

Mesopotamia had long been the jewel of the region, and it was the most desirable land for every civilization, so bloody wars had rocked Mesopotamia

for millennia. During the time that the Iranians migrated into the region and began to grow, Mesopotamia was held by the Assyrian Empire. When scholars study the history of the ancient Near East, several wars that had extremely brutal consequences (at least by modern standards) often stand out. Forced removal of entire populations, sieges that decimated entire cities, and wanton destruction of property were all tactics used by the various peoples of the ancient Near East against each other, but the Assyrians were the first people to make war a science. If the Assyrians are mentioned, images of war and brutality are among the first that come to mind, despite the fact that their culture prospered for nearly 2,000 years.

Like a number of ancient individuals and empires in that region, the negative perception of ancient Assyrian culture was passed down through Biblical accounts, and regardless of the accuracy of the Bible's depiction of certain events, the Assyrians clearly played the role of adversary for the Israelites. Indeed, Assyria (Biblical Shinar) and the Assyrian people played an important role in many books of the Old Testament and are first mentioned in the book of Genesis: "And the beginning of his kingdom was Babel and Erech, and Akkad, and Calneh, in the land of Shinar. Out of that land went forth Ashur and built Nineveh and the city Rehoboth and Kallah."

Although the Biblical accounts of the Assyrians are among the most interesting and are often corroborated with other historical sources, the Assyrians were much more than just the enemies of the Israelites and brutal thugs. A historical survey of ancient Assyrian culture reveals that although they were the supreme warriors of their time, they were also excellent merchants, diplomats, and highly literate people who recorded their history and religious rituals and ideology in great detail. The Assyrians, like their other neighbors in Mesopotamia, were literate and developed their own dialect of the Akkadian language that they used to write tens of thousands of documents in the cuneiform script.

The Assyrians certainly would not have disputed the way others portrayed them. After all, they not only considered military expansion to be advantageous to their civilization, but they also appear to have thoroughly enjoyed it, as one inscription vividly indicates. Written by Ashurnasirpal II, who ruled in the early 9th century BCE, an inscription proudly states, "I built a pillar over against the city gate, and I flayed all the chief men who had revolted, and I covered the pillar with their skins; some I walled up within the

pillar, some I impaled upon the pillar on stakes . . . and I cut off the limbs of the officers, of the royal officers who had rebelled . . . Many captives from among them I burned with fire, and many I took as living captives. From some I cut off their hands and their fingers, and from others I cut off their noses, their ears, and their fingers. Of many I put out the eyes. I made one pillar of the living, and another of heads, and I bound their heads to posts round about the city. Their young men and maidens I burned in the fire . . . Twenty men I captured alive and I immured them in the wall of the palace . . . The rest of the warriors I consumed with thirst in the desert of the Euphrates."[5]

In an ironic parallel to Persia's later conflicts with Greece, the Persian states argued amongst themselves to the point that they could not form an organized defense against the attacking Assyrians. The only thing that saved them was the rough terrain in which they lived, for they were often able to retreat up into the hills with their people, cattle, and horses to avoid Assyrian raids. If that failed, providing tribute in the form of horses often mollified the attackers.

Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser III took further steps in the mid-8th century BCE to ensure subjugation of the Iranian tribes, and his methods were quite brutal. The Assyrians resorted to removing the thumbs of military-aged men to keep them from becoming effective soldiers and relocated many individuals in an attempt to break up national identities. In this way, 65,000 Medes were moved into Mesopotamia from their traditional homeland further east.[6]

Though the Persians attempted to join with Babylon and Elam to defeat the Assyrians, they were ultimately unsuccessful, and the Assyrians subsequently took the great city of Babylon. King Sennacherib ordered that the city be sacked and its people massacred.

A contemporary depiction of King Sennacherib fighting the Babylonians

The Assyrian annals read, “At the beginning of my kingship, I brought about the overthrow of Merodach-baladan, king of Babylonia, together with the armies of Elam, in the plain of Kish. In the midst of that battle he forsook his camp, made his escape alone, fled to Guzummanu, went into the swamps and marshes, and (thus) saved his life. The chariots, wagons, horses, mules, asses, camels and (Bactrian) camels which he had forsaken at the onset of battle, my hands seized. Into his palace in Babylon I entered joyfully and I opened his treasure-house; -- gold, silver, vessels of gold and silver, precious stones of all kinds, good and property, an enormous (heavy) treasure, his wife, his hare, his courtiers and attendants, all of his artisans, as many as there were, his palace servants, I brought out, I counted as spoil, I seized.”

The submission of people the Assyrians defeated and/or colonized was formalized, ritualized, and documented in texts known as “loyalty oaths.” As a superpower, the Assyrian king was in a position to dictate the terms of most agreements and receive unilateral concessions from the other parties. However, there were cases when the Assyrian king was forced out of necessity to grant certain concessions to the other party (Parpolla 1988, xvi). These oaths were bound by blood, and to break one meant that the wrath of

the Assyrian army would fall on the violator. The loyalty oaths could be quite lengthy when they invoked the Assyrian pantheon, enumerated what were considered violations of the oath, and also gave a litany of punishments for transgressors.

Toward the end of his rule (around 681 BCE), Sennacherib seems to have encountered a figure who became part myth and part man in Persian history: Achaemenes, the eponymous founder of the Achaemenid Dynasty of Persia. No definitive evidence has been found to prove that he was a real man, and many legends have sprung up around his name, including that he was the grandson of Zeus and that he was raised by an eagle. Though obviously fanciful, other famous individuals, including Alexander the Great, cultivated wild mythological tales about themselves, and yet their existence is unquestionable, so many scholars believe that Achaemenes was a lord or form of king, likely originating from the Pasargadae tribe but holding rule over several others.[7]

Little came of these incursions if they occurred because the Assyrian Empire was vast, advanced, and powerful. It would require a similar powerful unification of peoples to defeat it. This push eventually came not from the Persians, but from the Medes. Around the end of the 7th century BCE, a judge named Deioces from a small Median village gained prestige and recognition for his admirable character and fair judgments. People from the surrounding villages began to bring their problems to him as well due to his good reputation, and before long he was the only judge in Media with the authority to decide cases. Under his judicial rule, a solid order took shape in Media. When he unexpectedly resigned his position, the lords of Media panicked and gathered together to form themselves into a monarchy with Deioces ruling as the king. He reigned for 53 years, built a palace at Ecbatana, and created a ruling dynasty and power to carry Media forward as a united empire.[8]

Herodotus's account seems to be a somewhat altered, romantic take on events. Although other sources do speak to a well-respected Median lord by the name of Deioces and his plots to subvert the Assyrians, historical sources outside of Herodotus indicate a slower unification than under the rule of a single man. Either way, the Median nations became acutely aware of the advantages of a unified nation and moved in that direction, and around 672 BCE, a leader by the name of Kshathrita, who may have been the son or

another descendant of Deioces, led a revolt against the Assyrians that resulted in a number of subjects rebelling and fleeing to the hills. He also led the final consolidation of Median power at the city of Ecbatana.[9] Shortly after, raiding nomadic tribes of Scythians and Cimmerians moved into Media, coming to dominate and rule over the region for 28 years according to Herodotus, and the Deiocid kings subjugated themselves under their rule in order to survive.

Meanwhile, civil war was tearing at the great Assyrian Empire. Once King Ashurbanipal had put down the rebellion led by his older brother, he moved against Elam and the other nations that had supported his brother's coup. He devastated the land and cities, and Elam fell apart, never again to coalesce into a great kingdom. Nonetheless, Assyria did not profit from Ashurbanipal's efforts either, as the king's wars devastated his military and infuriated his subjects, and his extravagance at court bankrupted the economy.

Upon the king's death, a great struggle for power and rebellions by the outlying regions quickly weakened the empire even further. In Media, Cyaxares, the grandson of Deioces, resolved to end the Assyrian Empire, both as a conqueror and as a son avenging his father who Herodotus claimed was killed in battle with the Assyrians. To achieve his goals, Cyaxares instituted widespread reforms in his military, taking a jumbled mess of fighters and reorganizing them along the lines of the Assyrian army, with divided units of varying skills that could be used in conjunction or separately as needed. He also made his army professional by offering substantial wages to his soldiers and personally funding quality equipment for them out of the royal treasury.[10]

In order to recover his independence, Cyaxares invited the leaders of the nomadic tribes ruling over Media to join him for a banquet, and while everyone feasted, he got them drunk and then had them murdered. Now free of his overlords, he swept through Media and reoccupied the former Median territories in addition to moving into Persian regions as well. Though he seemed uninterested in stable administrative structure, he excelled at conquest, and before long he invaded the once great Assyrian Empire.

Though the Assyrians were not what they had been, the civilization was still a formidable one, but Cyaxares picked off city by city, plundering and slaughtering as he went. He showed no mercy to the Assyrians, who had

shown none to them.

Through marriage between the Median princess Amytis and Babylonian prince Nebuchadnezzar, an alliance was formed between Media and Babylon, and together the two nations took Nineveh, a huge blow to the Assyrians. Archeologists have identified some of the destruction wrought at Nineveh and even determined the nations which perpetrated it, because unlike the collapse of many empires where there are no written texts that describe the events, the fall of Assyria was documented in Neo-Babylonian historical annals. The events are meticulously depicted as taking place in the 10th-17th years of the reign of Nabopolassar, and a text describes the anti-Assyrian coalition that ultimately destroyed Nineveh and Ashur. The text reads, "Twelfth year: When, in the month Abu, the Medians . . . against Nineveh . . . they rushed and seized the town of Tarbisu, a town belonging to the province of Nineveh . . . they went downstream on the embankment of the Tigris and pitched (camp) against Ashur. They made an attack against the town and [took the town], [the wall of] the town was torn down, a terrible defeat/massacre they inflicted upon the entire population. They took booty (and) carried pri[soners away]. The king of Akkad and his army who went to the aid of the Medians did not come in time for the battle." Thus, ironically but fittingly, the Assyrians were brutalized in the same ways they had employed by many of the same people that they had previously massacred and enslaved. Indeed, smashed tablets outlining treaties and desecrated statues of cruel Assyrian kings speak to the bitterness of the invaders against the long dominant Assyrian Empire.[11]

The passage of time would commit the final act of cruelty on the once mighty Assyrian Empire. Less than 200 years after its collapse, the Greek general, mercenary, and military historian Xenophon led an expedition of 10,000 Greek soldiers into the Achaemenid Persian Empire to support a rival claimant to the throne. When Xenophon's claimant was killed in battle, he and his men were forced to march through the empire back to Greece. On the journey back to Greece, the 10,000 Greeks fought many battles against natives and encountered many awe-inspiring sights, but one of the more inspiring sights that Xenophon wrote about in *Anabasis* was the ruins of the Assyrian city of Kalhu. Xenophon wrote, "After suffering this defeat the enemy retired, and the Greeks marched on safely for the rest of the day and reached the river Tigris. There was a large deserted city there called Larissa,

which in the old days used to be inhabited by the Medes. It had walls twenty-five feet broad and a hundred feet high, with a perimeter of six miles. It was built of bricks made of clay, with a stone base of twenty feet underneath. At the time when the Persians seized the empire from the Medes, the King of the Persians laid siege to this city but was quite unable to take it. A cloud, however, covered up the sun and hid it from sight until the inhabitants deserted the place, and so the city was taken. Near the city there was a pyramid of stone, a hundred feet broad, and two hundred feet high. Many of the natives from the neighboring villages had run away and taken refuge on it."

Xenophon's description of the ruins of Kalah is important for a few reasons, but most notably, the report is extremely anachronistic since he credits the Medes as the builders of the city when in fact they were among the coalition that destroyed it. In other words, the Assyrians, as dominant as they were in their own time, had been completely forgotten in a matter of just two centuries, and it would be many centuries more before historians fully understood the civilization that had once flourished there.

The Story of Cyrus's Childhood

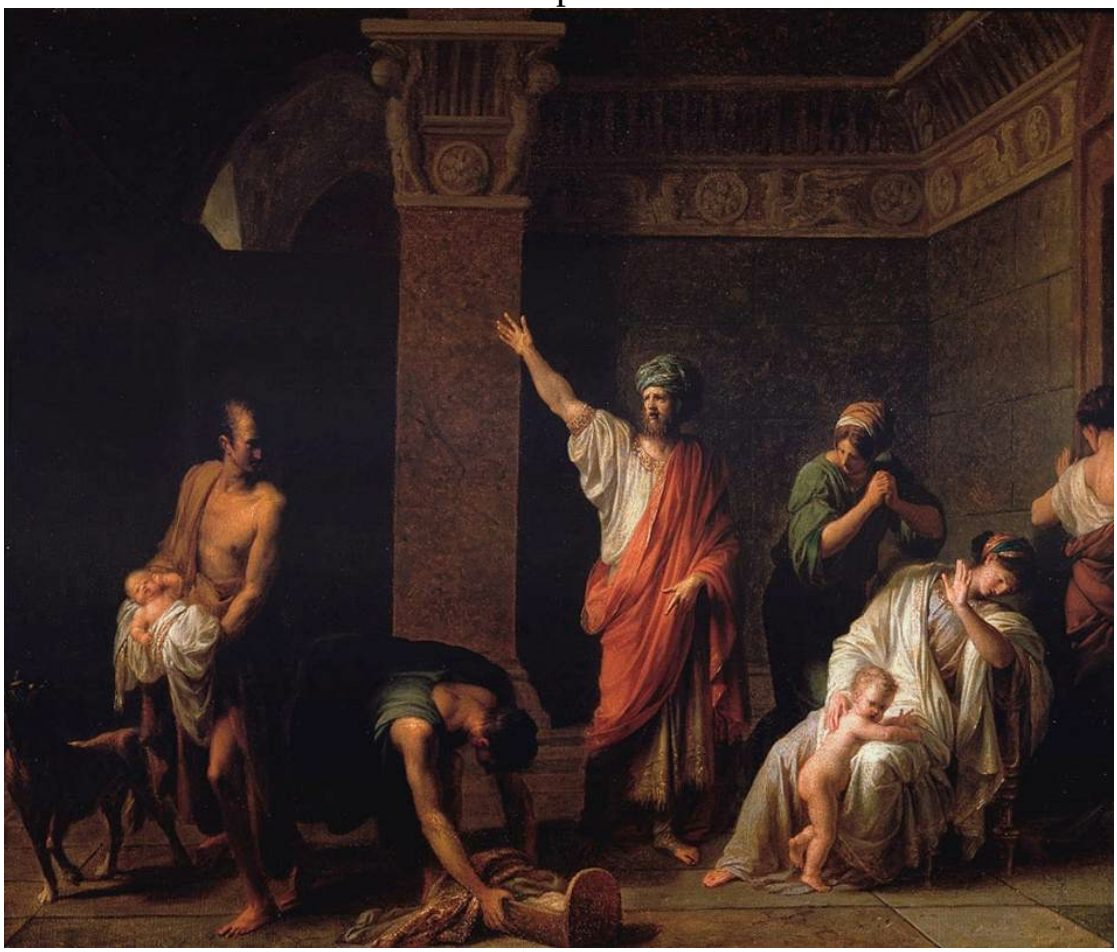
After the collapse of the Assyrians, the Medes continued their conquests, gathering in more lands until they were firmly established as one of the four remaining great kingdoms of the Near East. In addition to Media, the other three were Babylonia, Lydia, and Egypt.

It was into this world that Cyrus the Great was born, but his early years remain shrouded in mystery. Though two well-documented accounts exist, they both incorporate myth and legend into the history, so it can prove difficult to discern the line that divides fact from fiction.

Perhaps the most reliable of the available sources is Herodotus. In his account, he wrote that King Astyages of Media, the son of Cyaxares, dreamed one night that his daughter Mandane had urinated so much that it filled the city of Ecbatana and overflowed to flood all of Asia. After consulting with the Magians to interpret the dream, they suggested that it meant her son would aspire to greatness.

Fearing for his own power, he chose to give his daughter in marriage to a lower noble of Persia named Cambyses, "whom he found to be of a good descent and of a quiet disposition, counting him to be in station much below a Mede of middle rank." However, after the marriage, Astyages had another

dream in which he saw a vine grow from the womb of Mandane that covered all of Asia. Upon learning that his daughter was indeed pregnant, he panicked and sent for her to come back from Persia to Media, resolving to kill her son. When that son, Cyrus, was born, Astyages gave the child to Harpagus, a close relative of his and the man he trusted above all others, and ordered Harpagus to kill the infant. Harpagus seemed to agree to the arrangement, but he could not bring himself to actually kill the child himself, so he gave Cyrus to a man named Mitradates, a herdsman of the wild mountains, and ordered him to abandon the infant in the most desolate place he could find.



Jean-Charles Nicaise Perrin's painting of Astyages ordering Harpagus to kill Cyrus

As it turned out, Mitradates's wife was also pregnant and about to give birth. When the herdsman returned home, he learned that their child had been stillborn, and his wife implored him not to expose Cyrus. Instead, she asked her husband to keep Cyrus as their own and place their dead infant out on the rock in the royal finery to deceive the king and Harpagus. This Mitradates

did, and the dead child was presented to Harpagus and buried as Cyrus while the young Cyrus grew up in the herdsman's home.[12]

Cyrus seems to have possessed a precocious and commanding nature from a young age, which eventually led to his discovery. When he was 10, "the boys in their play chose as their king this one who was called the son of the herdsman: and he set some of them to build palaces and others to be spearmen of his guard, and one of them no doubt he appointed to be the eye of the king, and to one he gave the office of bearing the messages, appointing a work for each one severally." When one of the boys refused to follow his commands, young Cyrus demanded that the others seize him, and he gave him a whipping as punishment.

The boy unsurprisingly complained to his father, who complained to the king, and Cyrus and Mitradates were brought before Astyages. Thanks to the boy's regal and dignified speech and his resemblance to Astyages, the king realized who he was, and upon threat of torture, Mitradates revealed the whole tale. Yet Astyages was angrier with Harpagus as he was with the herdsman, and so he planned his revenge. Pretending to be grateful for the preservation of Cyrus, he told Harpagus to send him his own son, a boy of about 13, to come educate and befriend Cyrus. According to Herodotus, "But Astyages, when the son of Harpagus arrived, cut his throat and divided him limb from limb, and having roasted some pieces of the flesh and boiled others he caused them to be dressed for eating and kept them ready. And when the time arrived for dinner and the other guests were present and also Harpagus, then before the other guests and before Astyages himself were placed tables covered with flesh of sheep; but before Harpagus was placed the flesh of his own son, all but the head and the hands and the feet, and these were laid aside covered up in a basket. Then when it seemed that Harpagus was satisfied with food, Astyages asked him whether he had been pleased with the banquet; and when Harpagus said that he had been very greatly pleased, they who had been commanded to do this brought to him the head of his son covered up, together with the hands and the feet; and standing near they bade Harpagus uncover and take of them that which he desired."[13] Astyages apparently did truly repent of his attempt to kill Cyrus, for he sent him safely back to Cambyses and Mandane in Persia.

It's clear that several aspects of this narrative can be dismissed as mere literary flair, but buried within the tale there are probably some kernels of

truth. For example, the account includes the names of real individuals, such as Harpagus, who became a trusted advisor and general of Cyrus. Still, it seems unlikely that Astyages would wed his daughter to a relatively unknown Persian nobleman, and moreover, the Cyrus Cylinder, an inscribed artifact detailing Cyrus's exploits, named Cambyses as Cyrus's father and calls him "the Great King, King of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus (the first) Cyrus, the Great King, King of Anshan, great-grandson of Teispes, the Great King, King of Anshan; from a family that has always exercised kingship." The final line may be one of pure propaganda, but it would certainly have been brazen for Cyrus to have invented the kingship for three of his ancestors and not expect to be challenged upon it.

The Cyrus Cylinder

It would seem, then, that Cambyses was the king over a small number of Persian tribes, subservient to the Median overlords, but rising in prominence and stature. It was seemingly enough for Astyages to consider Cambyses a worthy husband for his daughter and seek a new heir through that union as he had no male children himself.

As likely heir apparent, Cyrus would have been required to spend a lot of time at the Median court, although it is also plausible that his presence there was less for political grooming and more a case of a welcomed hostage. It was not uncommon in ancient times for kings to keep the sons of their nobles close to them. As long as the subject king remained loyal, the children would

be treated as honored guests, but if he betrayed the king, punishment was promised upon his issue.[14] This situation is corroborated by Xenophon, who noted the friendship between Cyrus and Tigranes, the eldest son of the Armenian king, which developed while the latter was a hostage in the Median court.

Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* gives another possible reason behind Cyrus's residence in Media. According to the Greek author, Cyrus himself made the decision to remain in Media for his education as a youngster because the Medians had the best horses and cavalry, and he wished to become an exemplary rider and soldier. He may also have been educated similarly in the traditional manner of the royal Persian court, which was described by the ancient geographer Strabo: "From the age of five to twenty-four years they are taught to use the bow, to throw the javelin, to ride, and to speak the truth. They have the most virtuous preceptors, who interweave useful fables in their discourses, and rehearse, sometimes with sometimes without, music, the actions of the gods and of illustrious men. The youths are called to rise before day-break, at the sound of brazen instruments, and assemble in one spot, as if for arming themselves or for the chase. They are arranged in companies of fifty, to each of which one of the king's or a satrap's son is appointed as leader, who runs, followed at command by the others, an appointed distance of thirty or forty stadia. They require them to give an account of each lesson, when they practise loud speaking, and exercise the breath and lungs. They are taught to endure heat, cold, and rains; to cross torrents, and keep their armour and clothes dry; to pasture animals, to watch all night in the open air, and to eat wild fruits, as the terminthus, acorns, and wild pears."[15]

Cyrus was almost universally described by ancient sources as an intelligent, precocious youth with an eagerness to learn and a healthy respect for his elders and instructors. He also enjoyed engaging in sport and had ambitious bravery. Upon his first hunt outside the palace grounds, he pursued a deer at breakneck speeds, nearly fell from his horse, killed his quarry, and then, upon being attacked by a boar, courageously engaged with it directly and killed it. Xenophon also wrote that even in his youth, Cyrus was a kind and generous man. When he was preparing to depart Media and return to his parents in Persia, his grandfather gave him a large number of royal gifts, but rather than keep them, he distributed them all among his friends, down to the coat on his back.[16]

A picture of part of Claude Audran the Younger's painting, *Cyrus Hunting Wild Boar*, in Versailles

Cyrus's subsequent governing skills also suggest he did not spend his youth in the hut of a herdsman. As a member of the royal family and royal house, as well as being the expected heir to the throne, Cyrus was probably groomed from a very young age, which means he likely learned royal ideology, debate and oration, judicial decision-making, religion, administration, and particularly warfare. Two different sources make reference to Cyrus as both a general and as the commander of Astyages's personal men-at-arms. As Astyages's general, Xenophon claimed that Cyrus went to war against Armenia and captured the entire family of his old friend from court, Tigranes. In this confrontation, Cyrus was preparing to condemn the king of Armenia to death, but Tigranes spoke up in his defense and argued for his father's life. Eventually, Cyrus spared him, and through that decision, he gained a strong and devoted ally.[17]

Cyrus's Rise to Power

Though the Medians held ultimate control over Persia and the surrounding regions, it was a tenuous control at best. Cyaxares excelled as a conqueror, but he spent very little time on administratively organizing his conquests, so local rulers under the greater umbrella of the Median Empire retained significant autonomy, tied only loosely back to the king in Ecbatana. Though the system was fragile in that sense, it also had the advantage of not

antagonizing the client kings, who complacently accepted Median rule since it had little direct influence over them.

All of this changed around the time Cyrus was coming of age. Increasing tensions between Babylon and Media encouraged Astyages to push for a greater consolidation of his power, but if war came, he would need stronger control and the ability to call up soldiers from the outlying regions. Additionally, he seems to have grown more suspicious as the years went by, certainly a contributing factor in his desire to take a firmer grasp on the states under his control. To do this, he followed the example of the Assyrian Empire before him, dispatching guards and checkpoints along the roads, censoring messages about the kingdom, and employing spies and informants to surreptitiously maintain a closer watch on those under him. He personally withdrew further, no longer trying court cases and handling entreaties himself, but relying on his own appointed satraps. In turn, they slowly usurped power from the traditional local rulers.

Rather than establishing a firmer rule over the Median Empire, the efforts made by Astyages had the opposite effect, antagonizing the Persian nobles and traditional rulers with such measures.[18] At the head of the dissension was Harpagus, who resented the changes made by Astyages and still sought revenge for the murder of his son. According to Herodotus, Harpagus had maintained a strong friendship with Cyrus, and he carefully entered into rebellious plotting with a number of disenfranchised and disgruntled Median nobles. When he had their support, he reached out to Cyrus. The Greek historian explained, “Seeing that the roads were watched, but devised a scheme as follows:—he made ready a hare, and having cut open its belly but without pulling off any of the fur, he put into it, just as it was, a piece of paper, having written upon it that which he thought good; and then he sewed up again the belly of the hare, and giving nets as if he were a hunter to that one of his servants whom he trusted most, he sent him away to the land of the Persians, enjoining him by word of mouth to give the hare to Cyrus, and to tell him at the same time to open it with his own hands and let no one else be present when he did so. This then was accomplished, and Cyrus having received from him the hare, cut it open; and having found within it the paper he took and read it over. And the writing said this: ‘Son of Cambyses, over thee the gods keep guard, for otherwise thou wouldst never have come to so much good fortune. Do thou therefore take vengeance on Astyages who is thy

murderer, for so far as his will is concerned thou art dead, but by the care of the gods and of me thou art still alive; and this I think thou hast long ago learnt from first to last, both how it happened about thyself, and also what things I have suffered from Astyages, because I did not slay thee but gave thee to the herdsman. If therefore thou wilt be guided by me, thou shalt be ruler of all that land over which now Astyages is ruler. Persuade the Persians to revolt, and march any army against the Medes: and whether I shall be appointed leader of the army against thee, or any other of the Medes who are in repute, thou hast what thou desirest; for these will be the first to attempt to destroy Astyages, revolting from him and coming over to thy party.'"[19]

With this assurance of Harpagus's defection and, according to Ctesias, rumors that Astyages planned to replace Cyrus as his heir, Cyrus began to plan for an eventual coup. Possessed with a strong reputation and charisma, and likely playing upon the Persian outrage that their prince was to be denied inheritance of the kingdom, Cyrus easily gained the sympathy and support of the Persians.

In the midst of all this upheaval, Cyrus's father Cambyses died, leaving Persia in the hands of Cyrus. After a mourning period of five months, Cyrus was acclaimed as king, and it was also likely around this time that he married Cassandane, the daughter of Pharnaspes, an Achaemenid nobleman. The relationship between the two was apparently very genuine and devoted.

For the first five years of his rule, Cyrus moved against the smaller surrounding states in southwest Iran and became the ruler over all 10 traditional Persian tribes. As his power grew, more and more Persian nobles acknowledged him as their king, and his army gained experience on the battlefield.

When he felt ready to launch his attack, he roused the army to his cause with the promise of riches and luxury. Already frustrated beneath Median rule, they eagerly declared their allegiance to Cyrus and marched with him against Media. When Astyages learned of Cyrus's uprising, he apparently sent a letter to his grandson demanding his presence at court, to which Cyrus curtly replied that he would be seeing him much sooner than Astyages would like.[20]

Astyages was in a difficult position, for he was fighting enemies on two fronts already. His experienced general, Harpagus, requested the command, and Astyages granted it to him, no doubt relieved. However, just as he had

promised, when Harpagus led his soldiers to meet the Persians, he defected to Cyrus's cause along with the majority of his men. The few that were not party to the scheme quickly abandoned the skirmish and fled. Several more tribes took this opportunity to declare for Cyrus.

After Cyrus had been fighting for two years in Persia, solidifying his hold on the territory and working to reach Ecbatana, Astyages was finally able to gather an army to oppose his grandson. He led the force himself against Cyrus in 550 BCE, and most sources claim his army heavily outnumbered the Persians.

Nicolaus of Damascus is the only source to offer a detailed account of the battle.[21] According to him, the first day of battle consisted of a series of skirmishes in which the Persian forces fought bravely but could not prevail against the superior numbers of the Medes. That night, some of the Persians planned to desert to the Medes, and upon learning of this, Cyrus made sure they heard that he expected several thousand men to reinforce him at any time. The rumor was false, but the deserters carried the information to Astyages, and late in the night Cyrus commanded his men to stand guard holding a torch, convincing the Median king that reinforcements had arrived. After days of hard fighting, the Persians finally overcame the Medes from higher ground on a steep hill.

Nicolaus, Justin, and Plutarch mention some aid that the Mardian women provided in the battle. One account states that the women shamed the men into continuing the fight just when they seemed likely to falter. However, given that the Mardians had a reputation for training female warriors, something Quintus Curtius noted in his work about Alexander the Great, it seems likely that they more joined the battle to bolster the beleaguered Persians.[22]

Either way, the Median line eventually broke completely against the victorious Persians, and Astyages was taken prisoner. The exact details of his capture are vague; it may have been merely the result of the great battle or another skirmish shortly thereafter, but another intriguing possibility is suggested in the Babylonian Chronicles. That source indicated that "[Astyages] mustered [his army] and marched against Cyrus, king of Anshan… The army rebelled against Astyages and he was taken prisoner."[23]

Diodorus Siculus gave the following account: "When Astyages, the king of the Medes, had been defeated and was in disgraceful flight, he vented his

wrath upon his soldiers; and he displaced all who had been assigned positions of command, appointing others in their stead, and he picked out all who were responsible for the flight and put them to the sword, thinking that by punishing them in that way he could force the rest to show themselves brave fighters in times of danger, since he was a cruel man and, by nature, hard. Nevertheless, the people were not dismayed at the harsh treatment he meted out; on the contrary, every man, hating his violent and lawless manner, yearned for a change of affairs. Consequently there were gatherings of small groups and seditious conversations, the larger number exhorting one another to take vengeance on him."[24]

Together, the two sources easily reconcile. After placing all blame on his officers and soldiers and treating them poorly in his frustration, it is not difficult to believe that his soldiers had enough and decided to defect to Cyrus, handing over Astyages as a prisoner at the same time.

Regardless of how it happened, with Medes' king in his hands, Cyrus had won. According to Herodotus, Harpagus came to gloat over the captured king, reminding him of the feast where Astyages had fed him his own son and asking the king "how it pleased him to be a slave instead of a king." Astyages retorted bitterly that he considered Harpagus "to be at the same time the most unskillful and the most unjust of men; the most unskillful because, when it was in his power to become king, he had conferred the chief power on another, and the most unjust, because on account of that dinner he had reduced the Medes to slavery."[25]

A depiction of Cyrus and Harpagus receiving Astyages's surrender

The capture of the Median king also meant the capture of his royal tent and crown jewels. Wearing the trappings of the King of Media, Cyrus sat upon Astyages's throne and was hailed by his soldiers as "King of the Medes and the Persians." Soon after, he and his army marched into Ecbatana, jewel of the Median kingdom, displaying Astyages in chains and establishing Persia firmly as the new ruler of a great kingdom.

Unlike previous warlords, Cyrus had learned the disadvantages of a violent and brutal conquest, so rather than pillaging the city and slaughtering its inhabitants, he spared everyone and allowed the Median nobles to keep their lands and riches. He even spared Astyages. Herodotus wrote that the former king remained with Cyrus at court, while Ctesias and Justin assert that Cyrus made his grandfather the governor of the Hyrcanians.[26]

Cyrus's mercy only strengthened his reputation and increased his fame. He treated the Median state with equal regard, making it second only to Persia

and promoting loyal Medians to high positions in his new administration. He also married Amytis (either the daughter or granddaughter of Astyages), maintained most of the rites and ceremonies of the Median kings, and oversaw the fusion of the two cultures. That attempt at unification was so successful that even as he was considered the King of Persia and Media, he was successfully forming the trappings of one large Iranian state.

Persian Conquests

As so often happened with a change of power in the region, Cyrus soon found himself in conflict with other civilizations. The Lydian Empire lay to the north on the western half of Asia Minor, and with many successful port cities, Lydia was a rich and powerful nation. Its stunningly beautiful cities represented the height of civilization in the 6th century BCE, rivaled only by Babylon. The kingdom of Lydia had made an alliance with Astyages through marriage between the Median king and one of their princesses, the sister of their King Croesus, who held the throne when Cyrus came to power.

Croesus watched the rise of Cyrus with trepidation, but when an oracle gave him a prediction of military success, he eagerly took it despite the concerns of some of his advisors who knew that the Persian army was a formidable opponent. Undeterred, he marched into Cappadocia "because he desired to acquire the land in addition to his own possessions, and then especially because he had confidence in the oracle and wished to take vengeance on Cyrus for Astyages."[27]

Mustering his army, he moved against the city of Pteria. Herodotus wrote, "Here he encamped and ravaged the fields of the Syrians. Moreover he took the city of the Pterians, and sold the people into slavery, and he took also all the towns that lay about it; and the Syrians, who were not guilty of any wrong, he forced to remove from their homes."[28]

Cyrus made an initial attempt to stall Croesus's progress by urging the Ionians under Lydian rule to revolt, but his ambassadors were unable to convince the political leaders to act. Meanwhile, Cyrus had gathered his own forces and marched as quickly as possible into Cappadocia, arriving while the Lydian army was still in the region of Pteria. After a long, fierce battle, the Lydians withdrew, but the battle was still considered a draw. Both sides sustained heavy casualties, and Croesus's decision to withdraw was based on his belief that his army had done enough damage to Cyrus's forces to stall the Persian campaign, at least for the winter. He returned to Sardis, sending out

envoys to his allies to request reinforcements, and he even went so far as to disband the main bulk of his own forces.

Willem B.K.'s map of Ancient Lydia

Unfortunately for the Lydians, his assumption proved incorrect, and Cyrus was far more dangerous than he realized. The Persian king heard of Croesus's plans to disband his army, so he immediately followed Croesus back over the mountains, coming up against his remaining soldiers on the plains outside Sardis. Despite their weakened numbers, the Lydians remained a potentially dangerous enemy, and Herodotus asserted that there was, at that time, "no nation in Asia more courageous or more stout in battle than the Lydian; and they fought on horseback carrying long spears, the men being excellent in horsemanship."[29]

It was the cavalry that offered the greatest threat, but with the aid of his advisors, Cyrus devised an ingenious plan. The Persian army had a number of camels used as pack animals to haul supplies. Knowing that the Lydian cavalry horses were unfamiliar with camels, Cyrus ordered that they be stripped of their packs, provided with riders, and placed at the front of the line, with the infantry behind them and his own cavalry in the rear.

The ruse worked perfectly, and when the Lydian horses saw the camels, they panicked and fled. The Lydian cavalrymen bravely leapt off their mounts to engage anyway, but they had lost their greatest advantage. After another fierce fight with heavy losses on both sides, the Lydians were driven back into Sardis and the Persians settled in to lay siege to the city.[30]

After 14 days, Cyrus offered a reward to any who could take the city. Many tried and failed, until one man, a Mardian named Hyroiades, approached the unguarded side of the citadel. It had such a precipitous wall that the Lydians felt secure that no attacker could scale it. However, Hyroiades had observed the day before that a Lydian had descended that side of the citadel to retrieve the helmet which he had dropped, so after careful consideration, he managed to scale the wall. More came after him, and in the process, Sardis was taken and plundered.

Polyaenus gave a different version, claiming that Cyrus instead used some more manipulative tactics to gain access to Sardis. According to him, “Cyrus ordered the prisoners from Sardis, who were the friends and relations of the besieged, to be bound up and paraded in front of them. At the same time, a herald proclaimed that, if the besieged surrendered the citadel to Cyrus, they would receive their friends and relations safe and without ransom; but if they persisted in holding out against him, he would hang every man before their eyes. The besieged chose to save their friends, rather than wait for the outcome of the precarious hopes, which Croesus had of assistance from the Greek states; and so they surrendered the citadel.” Croesus was taken prisoner and brought before Cyrus.[31]

One small detail remains from the siege. Apparently during the assault, Cyrus built siege towers as high as the walls, and placed dummies on top of them, dressed in Persian military uniforms and armed with bows. During the night, his men positioned these towers next to the walls, and in the morning, while the citizens panicked at the appearance of the towers and the soldiers braced for attack, Cyrus led the attack on a different side of the citadel.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the chronology of this clever ruse is in some doubt. One account seems to suggest that this was how Cyrus gained access to the city as the citizens actually fled from the city, leaving the gates open to the attackers. Perhaps some truth exists in both and the deception was used to distract the Lydians while Cyrus and his men followed the Mardian over the steep citadel wall.[32]

Unlike some of his later fights, Cyrus approached the Lydian campaign with a certain degree of ruthlessness. Before the initial battle, he had ordered his soldiers to show no mercy and spare no Lydian other than Croesus, who was to be brought before him alive at any cost. Herodotus wrote that Cyrus first planned to burn Croesus alive, but due to his mercy and the intervention

of the gods, he changed his mind and extinguished the fire afterward treating Croesus and Sardis with respect.

The archeological evidence suggests a more violent conquest, as one modern historian noted: “Recent excavations at the Lydian capital have revealed evidence of significant fire damage dating to the middle of the sixth century BCEE. Providing further testimony as to the violence of the Persian takeover are the skeletal remains of two soldiers discovered inside the city’s fortifications. Both soldiers appear to have suffered “parry” fractures to their forearms and to have perished from wounds to the head and back. One of the soldiers seems to have died in especially gruesome fashion, with his head hacked twice with a sword and bludgeoned once with an ax or mace. A third skeleton, found in a nearby house, appears to have belonged to a non-combatant who was killed during the looting of the city.”[33]

A depiction of the Persians defeating the Lydians

The successful siege reaped great rewards for Cyrus. Lydia had long been a wealthy kingdom, and the royal treasury was kept in Sardis. Pliny the Elder reported that “Cyrus, after his conquest of Asia Minor, found booty comprising 24,000 pounds of gold, besides golden vessels and articles, including a throne, a plane-tree and a vine. By this victory he won 500,000 talents of silver and a crater that had belonged to Semiramis weighing 15 talents.”[34] Such bountiful wealth was invaluable to the conqueror, who had to manage to pay all of his soldiers and provide them with food and supplies,

often in long supply lines in distant regions.

The subjugation of Lydia was all but over with the capture of Sardis and Croesus, though one of Cyrus's lieutenants had to return to put down a small attempt at a rebellion shortly after Cyrus departed for Ecbatana. The uprising was stopped with little fighting, its leader was captured (and likely executed), and the famous Lydian cavalry were disarmed. Meanwhile, Cyrus's lieutenant, Mezares, went on to attack Ionia in punishment for their refusal to join the Persians, and his death from illness shortly thereafter did nothing to slow the campaign, for Cyrus sent Harpagus to continue it. Before long, all of Asia Minor was under Persian control.[35]

Cyrus, meanwhile, was already planning his coming campaigns. His first priority was to the east and northeast, the region from which his ancestors had arrived. The threat of barbarian invasions, such as the nomadic tribes that were certainly still remembered by the Persians at that time, was a strong motivation to secure a buffer region between the heartland of Persia and the possibility of foreign attack. The regions were also less imposing than the great and ancient cities of Babylon and Egypt, and Cyrus likely considered them easier to conquer. He probably also figured that continued experience for his soldiers and a common heritage would make it easier to maintain control over the newly subjugated lands.

Nonetheless, his large, slow-moving army nearly met disaster early on in the mountains. Spread out and desperately slowed, the soldiers lacked food, water, and shelter from cold winds and even falling snow. It might have been a sad and ignoble end if not for a local tribe, the Ariaspians, who brought them provisions, blankets, and tents to save them from the elements. A grateful Cyrus christened them the "Royal Benefactors," a name that persisted even into Alexander the Great's time. The "title was traditionally reserved for those who rendered the highest service to the king, and its bearers enjoyed special privileges. Alexander's chroniclers inform us that no Persian king ever sought to impose tribute upon the Ariaspians, and we never hear of Ariaspian soldiers serving in the imperial armies."[36]

Saved from certain death, the Persians went on through the rough terrain of the region and successfully subjugated the Arachosians, Pactyans, Bactrians, Chorasmians, Sogdians, and Sakas. Through a network of strategically placed fortresses and largely independent political structures, Cyrus managed to regulate and maintain these territories, and unlike his predecessors, he was

careful to establish a system of governance that allowed local, loyal satraps to govern their regions while reporting to him.

Having concluded his campaigns to the northeast, Cyrus next turned his eye to India. In a grueling march through treacherous landscapes, including the infamous Gedrosian desert where Alexander the Great lost a number of his soldiers, Cyrus came to the edge of India. He did conquer a couple of tribes and set up rule over the Sattagydians on the western borders of India, but like Alexander, he soon abandoned his attempted conquest and withdrew to Persia. Babylon was a far greater prize, and India was not worth the loss of life it would take to conquer it.

Babylon was an immensely ancient city at the heart of the great Babylonian Empire. Highly fortified and incredibly wealthy, it possessed a myriad of treasures and a population fond of luxurious living. In addition, Babylon's king, Nabonidus, had long been drawing the ire of his subjects - he had usurped the throne from the Chaldean dynasty, showed disrespect for the religion of the empire, instituted widely unpopular reforms, and altogether demonstrated an obsession with Babylon's "golden past" and a disdain for its present. Many of Babylon's subjects were conquered nations with little love for their conqueror, and they were further outraged by Babylon's practice of forcing exiles and migrations in order to distribute cultural groups under its rule and lessen the chances of organized resistance. With Nabonidus universally despised, it was Nabonius's heir, Belshazzar, who largely maintained the empire through the chaos, though he himself was immensely unpopular as well.[37]

While Belshazzar was instrumental in propping up the failing empire, Xenophon suggests that he also provided one of the catalysts for its destruction through the wrong he did to an older nobleman named Gobryas. As the Persians advanced toward Babylon, Gobryas came before Cyrus and told him, "I have come to you, a suppliant at your feet. I am ready to be your slave and your ally, and I implore you to be my avenger. You yourself will be a son to me, for I have no male children now. He whom I had, my only son, he was beautiful and brave, my lord, and loved me and honored me as a father rejoices to be loved. [Nabonidus] had sent for my son, meaning to give him his own daughter in marriage; and I let my boy go, with high hopes and a proud heart, thinking that when I saw him again the king's daughter would be his bride. And the prince, who is now king, invited him to the chase, and bade

him do his best, for he thought himself far the finer horseman of the two… but the monster could not contain his jealousy; he snatched a spear from one of his followers and ran my son through the body, my only son, my darling, and took his life. And I, unhappy that I am, I, who thought to welcome a bride-groom, carried home a corpse. I, who am old, buried my boy with the first down on his chin, my brave boy, my well-beloved. And his assassin acted as though it were an enemy that he had done to death. He never showed one sign of remorse, he never paid one tribute of honor to the dead, in atonement for his cruel deed…I could never be loyal to that man, and he, I know, could never regard me as a friend. He knows too well how I feel towards him, and how, after my former splendor, I pass my days in mourning, growing old in loneliness and grief. If you can receive me, if you can give me some hope of vengeance for my dear son, I think I should grow young again, I should not feel ashamed to live, and when I came to die I should not die in utter wretchedness."[38]

Whether this sad tale is true, his loyal submission to Cyrus is accepted as factual, and he is recorded not only as a key advisor and member of Cyrus's inner circle, but also the man who led the first of the Persian forces into the great city of Babylon.

Cyrus advanced toward Babylon in the winter of 539 BCE, moving into Mesopotamia at a time of year when most generals refused to campaign. Cyrus encountered little resistance, and Nabonidus rightly feared that his subjects would welcome the Persian incursion. In a move that seems odd and ineffective today, the Babylonian king collected all of the sacred idols of the outlying cities and held them hostage in Babylon. Whether it was to protect the idols or to attempt to encourage his vassals to fight, the move had the opposite effect. The people were utterly demoralized, and they accepted the arrival of Cyrus without a murmur, entirely destitute and hopeless without the idols which were the central point of their life and culture.

The Babylonian army, meanwhile, was beleaguered and short on members, as well as having less than admirable commanders. They could not afford to take the fight to the outlying regions, but instead were forced to merely wait behind the heavy fortifications of the inner strongholds, including Opis, Sippar, and Babylon itself.[39]

The several accounts of the final fall of the city of Babylon contain many contradictions, but through comparison and reasoning, historians have put

together a likely sequence of events. The first two cities that Cyrus had to take were Opis and then Sippar. Some of the descriptions of siege warfare at the gates of Babylon, which run contradictory to the majority of sources, are believed to have been errors on the part of Greek scholars who incorrectly identified the city in question. The siege actually seems to have taken place at Opis after the Persian army drove back Babylonian soldiers.

Herodotus claims that Cyrus elaborately engineered a system to dam up the Euphrates so that his men could easily wade across it and enter Babylon. Interestingly enough, the fascinating tale of temporarily lowering the river depth is not in question, but it is the Tigris River that lends itself to this tactic, not the Euphrates. Therefore, it is likely that Herodotus once again mistook the city, and it is more likely this brilliant strategy allowed the Persians access into the city of Opis. Abandoned by the army and having witnessed the fall of Opis, Sippar opened its gates and surrendered, welcoming the Persians.[40]

The Babylonian army apparently withdrew across the Euphrates and formed up to give battle with the river as a natural defensive advantage. Unwilling to allow himself to be drawn in, Cyrus feinted the Babylonians by leading much of his force to camp near the Babylonians, indicating to them that he intended to fight there. Meanwhile, his new ally, Gobryas, was dispatched with a smaller detachment of soldiers to take Babylon itself.

With the city completely defenseless, Gobryas and his men walked into Babylon and took the city without a single struggle. Certain accounts claim that Belshazzar and many nobles were busy feasting in the palaces, and they did not even know that the outer limits of the city had fallen until they were surprised to see the Persians entering their banquet halls. Though the authenticity of this tale has been questioned, there was a Babylonian festival that would have been celebrated at that time of year, lending some credence to the story. The Nabonidus chronicle states: “In the month of . . . [Lugal-Marada and the other gods] of the town Marad, Zababa and the (other) gods of Kish, the goddess Ninlil [and the other gods of] Huragkalama entered Babylon. Til the end of the month Ululu (all) the gods of Akkad . . . those from about the IM and (those from) below the IM, entered Babylon. The gods from Borsippa, Kutha, . . . and Sippar (however) did not enter. In the month of Tashritu, when Cyrus attacked the army of Akkad in Pis on the Tigris, the inhabitants of Akkad revolted, but he (Nabonidus) massacred the confused

inhabitants. The 14th day, Sippar was seized without battle. Nabonidus fled. The 16th day, Gobryas (Ugbaru), the governor of Gutium and the army of Cyrus entered Babylon without battle. Afterwards Nabonidus was arrested in Babylon when he returned. . . From the month of Kislimu to the moth of Addaru, the gods of Akkad which Nabonidus had made come down to Babylon . . . returned to their sacred cities…"

Nabonidus was taken prisoner, and Gobryas worked to organize the administrative system until Cyrus arrived 17 days later.[41] Cyrus may have been engaged in mopping up the Babylonian army and any remaining resistance, but the delay likely also allowed Cyrus to be sure that representatives of all of Babylon's vassal states would be present to swear their allegiance to him. It also allowed time to prepare an immense, triumphant entry into Babylon. He came through the famous Ishtar Gate in a splendid procession, with the inhabitants of the city lining the street with leaves and flowers. An edict from Cyrus was read out, likely something similar to the text that covers the Cyrus Cylinder, delineating his ancestry and lineage and providing a general framework for how he planned to rule. It was likely the pinnacle moment of Cyrus's life. Babylon was his, and he was the king of the largest empire the world had yet known.

The Cyrus Cylinder reads, "He (furthermore) interrupted in a fiendish way the regular offerings, he did . . . he established within the sacred cities. The worship of Marduk, the king of the gods, he [chang]ed into abomination, daily he used to do evil against his city. . . He [tormented] its [inhabitant]s with corvée-work without relief, he ruined them all. Upon their complaints the lord of the gods became terribly angry and [he departed from] their region, (also) the (other) gods living among them left their mansions, wroth that he had brought (them) into Babylon . . . And he (Cyrus) did always endeavor to treat according to justice the black-headed whom he (Marduk) has made him conquer. Marduk, the great lord, a protector of his people/worshippers, beheld with pleasure his (i.e. Cyrus') good deeds and his upright mind (and therefore) ordered him to march against his city Babylon . . . Without any battle, he made him enter his town Babylon, sparing Babylon any calamity. He delivered into his hands Nabonidus, the king who did not worship him (i.e. Marduk). All the inhabitants of Babylon as well as of the entire country of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors (included), bowed to him (Cyrus) and kissed his feet, jubilant that he (he received) the kingship,

and with shining faces. Happily they greeted him as a master through whose help they had come (again) to life from death (and) had all been spared damage and disaster, and they worshiped his name."

The fate of Babylon under Achaemenid Persian rule proved to be much different than what the city endured under the Assyrians and Hittites. The Persians did not lay waste to the temples or ziggurats, nor did they take the Marduk statue away. In fact, things did not change much under Achaemenid Persian rule - documents indicate that the Persians derived considerable revenue from the Babylonian temples, but their rights and power were not reduced below the levels they enjoyed during the Neo-Babylonian Dynasty. Babylonian officials and bureaucrats were retained in their positions and not divested of any real power, and the important religious festivals, such as the New Year Festival, were kept by the Persians. In time, the Achaemenid Persian kings used Babylon as one of their royal residences and were greatly influenced by Babylonian art, as can be seen from the ruins of their own magnificent capital, Persepolis (Ehrenberg 2007, 102). Although Babylon lost its independence in 539 BC and became one of the 20+ satrapies (or provinces) in the Achaemenid Empire, its culture continued on as it had since the days of the First Dynasty. The Persians were astute political thinkers and knew that if their subjects were allowed to retain their religious and cultural traditions, the chances of rebellion would be lessened.

Cyrus's Final Years

Cyrus may be one of the few individuals to earn his "Great" moniker, and his ambition clearly drove him to impressive heights, something Diodorus claims was instilled in him by his father, who "reared him after the manner of kings and had made him zealous to emulate the highest achievements. And it was clear that he would take hold of great affairs, since he revealed an excellence beyond his years."[42] Yet his most distinguishing success was not his ability for quick and efficient conquest, but his ability to lay the foundation of a monarchal, political, cultural, and administrative system that would hold together his vast empire for over 200 years.

Having created a great kingdom, it was imperative that Cyrus transform from a great conqueror into a great king. The kings and rulers of the regions had long functioned mainly as tribal leaders, given the authority to rule due to their higher wealth or abilities, or because they took that rule by force. However, Cyrus began the transformation of the Persian monarchy into one

of divine appointment and complete power, supported by his title of “Great King, “Mighty King,” and “King of the Four Quarters of the Universe.” In appearance, Cyrus was said to be a handsome young man, with a long nose and a natural charm, which almost certainly aided in this transformation, as did the ongoing wartime economy that enabled him to constantly enrich his nobles and keep them happily behind his cause.

The ancient historians attribute the institution of the practice of *proskynesis*, a form of incredibly high honor paid to an individual, almost on par with worship, to Cyrus’s rule. It was likely some form of prostration before the king, and something the Greeks found so reprehensible that they often offended the Persian king when seeking an audience with him. It became a major stumbling block for Alexander’s generals as well when the Macedonian king began to seek the same gesture from his countrymen.

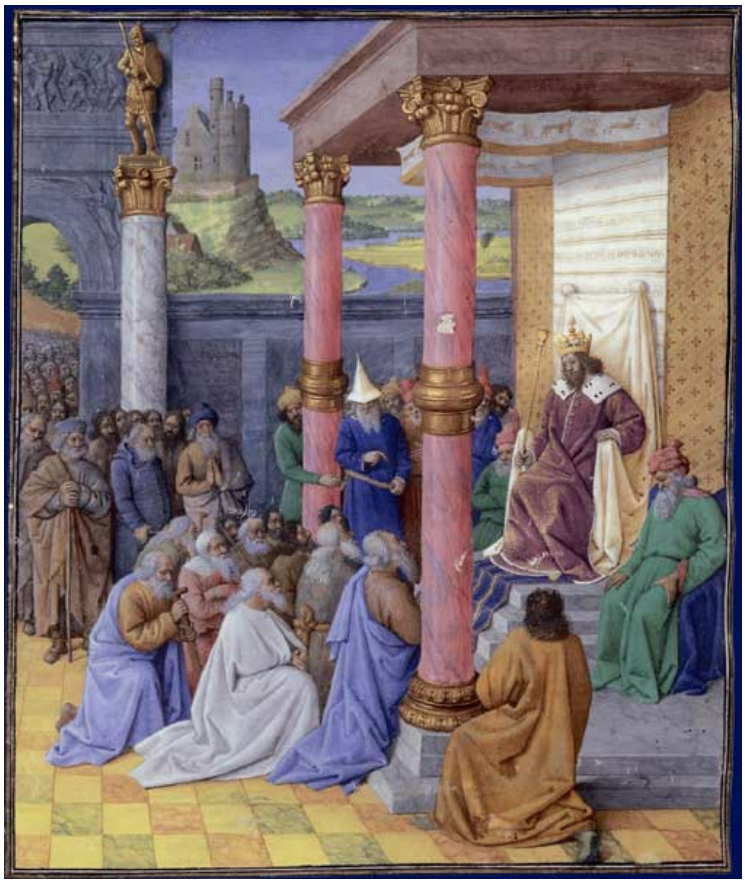
Xenophon claimed the first *proskynesis* occurred spontaneously, upon sight of Cyrus’s glory: “And then at last Cyrus himself was seen, coming forth from the gates in his chariot, wearing his tiara on his head, and a purple tunic shot with white, such as none but the king may wear, and trews of scarlet, and a cloak of purple. Round his tiara he wore a diadem, and his kinsmen wore the same, even as the custom is to this day. And the king's hands hung free outside his cloak. Beside him stood a charioteer—he was a tall man, but he seemed to be dwarfed by Cyrus; whether it was really so, or whether there was some artifice at work, Cyrus towered above him. At the sight of the king, the whole company fell on their faces. Perhaps some had been ordered to do this and so set the fashion, or perhaps the multitude were really overcome by the splendor of the pageant and the sight of Cyrus himself, stately and tall and fair. For hitherto none of the Persians had done obeisance to Cyrus.”

Xenophon speculated that it may have been a calculated move on the part of Cyrus’s closest supporters, which is not inconceivable considering Cyrus’s circumspection and foresight in other matters,[43] but either way, the awe was further fostered by the intentional splendor of Cyrus’s court which was a magnificent affair. Over time, Cyrus himself became less and less accessible, a mysterious figure at the center of the wealthy regalia and complex ceremony, and the further withdrawn he became, the larger his image grew. Though Cyrus still maintained a relatively close relationship with his top advisors, later Persian kings pushed the isolation and mystery even further, sometimes even inviting their nobles to a feast while sitting behind a

screened curtain.

Another aspect that enabled Cyrus to unite his kingdom in a lasting manner was his clemency and his tolerance, an uncommon trait for ancient rulers. He allowed all forms of religion and did not suppress any particular culture. Cyrus's merciful nature even gained him a description as a great hero in the national epic tale of the Armenians by acting as a mediator and resolving their long-standing feud with the Chaldeans. This tolerance is also particularly noted by Jewish writers in the Bible. They acknowledged Cyrus's moderation, called him an instrument of their God, and praised him for sending the Jews exiled to Babylon back home to Jerusalem. He generally spared the rulers of the nations that he conquered, placed their family members and nobles in positions of power in his new administration, and gave particularly high honors to enemies who fought bravely in battle. He was also traditionally generous, giving lavish gifts to his loyal followers.[44]

This kindness had its limits, however. Xenophon mentioned, in praise, that Cyrus employed "exceptionally severe" punishments for criminals, blinding perpetrators, cutting off their hands and feet, or whipping them. Cyrus could be ruthless in dealing with those who betrayed him, perhaps an overreaction to disloyalty fueled by one who valued loyalty so highly in himself. Those who had betrayed him were usually executed in brutal, painful ways, and the killings were generally done in public for all to see.



A depiction of Cyrus allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem

Cyrus ruled successfully until his death in 530 BCE, but accounts vary widely as to how he met his end. Xenophon provided the most pleasant option, claiming that Cyrus died peacefully in his capital, though perhaps for a warrior king like Cyrus, this is merely wishful thinking. Berossus, a priest of Marduk and writer from the Hellenistic Era around the 3rd century BCE, claimed that he died in battle while fighting the Dahae tribes.

The two most detailed and dramatic accounts come from Ctesias and Herodotus, though it is interesting to note that several sources, including Berossus, Ctesias, and Herodotus, place the king's death somewhere along the banks of the Syr Darya River, a detail whose consistency supports its accuracy. Herodotus's account, while perhaps the most dramatic and interesting, likely contains a lot of fabricated details, but it offers up an exciting tale with epic individuals, and some of its components match nicely with those of Ctesias's history. According to Herodotus, Cyrus died in battle against the Massagetae, a tribe of Scythian nomadic warriors. Their ruler was a queen, Tomyris, who Cyrus tried to woo, hoping to gain the kingdom. She

understood his true motivations, however, and rejected him, so Cyrus moved on the Massagetae. At the suggestion of Croesus, the former king of the Lydians and now one of his chief advisors, he planned a trap for the army, taking his best fighters back from his camp and leaving his lesser soldiers behind. They put up a fight, but they were killed by the attacking Massagetae, who then sat down at the tables left by Cyrus, which were laid with a great feast and wine. Once they were filled with the food and drink, they became drowsy and fell asleep, and Cyrus returned with the remainder of his army, slaughtering many and capturing even more.

One of those captured was the son of Tomyris, and when she heard what had happened, she sent a message to Cyrus that read, "Cyrus, insatiable of blood, be not elated with pride by this which has come to pass, namely because with that fruit of the vine, with which ye fill yourselves and become so mad that as the wine descends into your bodies, evil words float up upon its stream,—because setting a snare, I say, with such a drug as this thou didst overcome my son, and not by valour in fight. Now therefore receive the word which I utter, giving thee good advice:—Restore to me my son and depart from this land without penalty, triumphant over a third part of the army of the Massagetai: but if thou shalt not do so, I swear to thee by the Sun, who is lord of the Massagetai, that surely I will give thee thy fill of blood, insatiable as thou art."[45]

Tomyris's son, meanwhile, managed to commit suicide, and Cyrus paid no attention to Tomyris's warning. He was far more concerned with a disturbing dream that had troubled him. According to Herodotus, "In his sleep it seemed to Cyrus that he saw the eldest of the sons of Hystaspes having upon his shoulders wings, and that with the one of these he overshadowed Asia and with the other Europe. Now of Hystaspes the son of Arsames, who was a man of the Achaemenid clan, the eldest son was Darius, who was then, I suppose, a youth of about twenty years of age, and he had been left behind in the land of the Persians, for he was not yet of full age to go out to the wars."[46]

Fearing that the vision meant that Darius was plotting against him, he called Hystaspes to him and told him of the dream, bidding him to return to Persia, make sure Darius could not put any plots in motion, and prepare to present his son before Cyrus for examination upon the king's return. It speaks to the trust and loyalty expected between Cyrus and his top nobles that he trusted Darius's own father to see to this. Indeed, Hystaspes is said to have

responded, "O king, heaven forbid that there should be any man of Persian race who would plot against thee, and if there be any, I pray that he perish as quickly as may be; seeing that thou didst make the Persians to be free instead of slaves, and to rule all nations instead of being ruled by others. And if any vision announces to thee that my son is planning rebellion against thee, I deliver him over to thee to do with him whatsoever thou wilt."[47]

Herodotus went on to write, however, that the vision was not indicating that Darius was plotting against him, but that Cyrus was to die in the coming battle and that his kingdom would one day pass to Darius. Indeed, Darius would take over the kingdom after the death of Cambyses II.

After sending his advisor off, Hystaspes returned to Persia while Cyrus's forces once again met the Massagetae in a vicious battle. Eventually the Massagetae triumphed, and Cyrus himself fell. Then Tomyris filled a skin with human blood and had a search made among the Persian dead for the corpse of Cyrus. When she found it, she let his head down into the skin and said, "Though I yet live and have overcome thee in fight, nevertheless thou didst undo me by taking my son with craft: but I according to my threat will give thee thy fill of blood."[48] Of course, the tale is likely exaggerated if not completely false. At the very least, the story of Cyrus's body being taken and mutilated by the Massagetae contradicts the fabulous tomb that Alexander visited hundreds of years later. According to ancient writers, Cyrus's spectacular tomb had an inscription telling visitors, "O man, whoever thou art, from wheresoever thou comest, for I know you shall come, I am Cyrus, who founded the Persian Empire. Grudge me not, therefore, this little earth that covers my body."

A painting that depicts Queen Tomyris receiving the head of Cyrus

Mohammed Ganji's picture of the Tomb of Cyrus

As a result, Ctesias's version of Cyrus's death is considered more accurate. He wrote that Cyrus had attacked the Derbices tribe, but in the initial battle he fell off his horse in the melee and was stabbed in the thigh. His men quickly pulled him out of the fighting, which came to an inconclusive ending. The Persians contacted their ally, Amorges, who brought cavalry reinforcements, and a day or two later, they fought a second battle and won a decisive victory. However, Cyrus did not recover from his wound, and he

died three days after being injured in battle.[49]

No matter how he died, Cyrus passed his kingdom peacefully on to his son, Cambyses II, who expanded the Persian Empire still further by conquering Egypt and solidifying his father's administrative system. So structured was the empire that when Darius I staged a coup and took control of Persia after Cambyses II's death, the kingdom continued to be strong and stable.

The ancient sources differ on certain aspects of Cyrus's life, but today it can be safely assumed that the founder of the Achaemenid Persian Empire was a strong warrior who demonstrated clemency and tolerance, to the extent that he was often viewed more as a "liberator" and "father" than a conqueror. He built a vast and stable empire out of disjointed, disgruntled, and scattered tribes. His charisma and charm, combined with a natural tendency toward kindness, mercy, and generosity, made his enemies his friends and held his kingdom together in a way that the brutal Assyrian kings could never have contemplated. On top of it all, he successfully organized the system in such a way that it could continue to survive and thrive well after the death of its founder.

The difficulties of successfully administrating vast territories and responding properly to crises without a central figurehead have been extensively documented throughout history. At the same time, monarchies have constantly floundered thanks to the incompetence, corruption, and cruelty of the central figurehead. After all, for every Cyrus or Augustus, there is a Nero or Caligula.

All of this explains why many of the people he subjugated admired him as much as they respected him, and it makes clear why Cyrus is remembered as Cyrus the Great over 2,500 years later.

Darius Takes Power

Young Darius was a firsthand witness to the events surrounding Cyrus the Great's demise, but far from planning an overthrow, it would seem he was a loyal follower as his position was elevated in Cambyses's court. Throughout the campaigns, Darius served in the Persian military, and it is now believed that he served as the personal spear-carrier to Cambyses himself, an important role of high honor. In this capacity, he would have been a close confederate of the king and accompanied him in a march south toward the Kingdom of Kush and Ethiopia, which Herodotus claimed ended in

catastrophe for the Persians on account of Cambyses going mad and failing to make any adequate preparations for the journey. It seems more likely that he simply underestimated the terrain into which he was entering and was forced to withdraw, as archeological evidence suggests that the Persians maintained a garrison throughout their rule in a location further south than Herodotus's claimed catastrophe.[50]

Darius's rise to power is also fraught with historical uncertainty, as people continue to debate whether he was a usurper or whether he took back the throne from an imposter. Herodotus claimed it was the latter, and his account begins while Cambyses and Darius were both still in Egypt. Cambyses had one younger brother, known as Smerdis by the Greeks or Bardiya among the Persians. Darius recorded that Cambyses had his brother murdered before the army departed for Egypt, while Herodotus tells a more convoluted version in which Bardiya joined the campaigns in Egypt, but Cambyses grew jealous of his younger brother after Bardiya was able to draw back an exceptionally tight bow brought before the Persians by the Ethiopian king. In his envy, he sent Bardiya away to Susa, but later had a dream in which he saw his brother seated on the throne. Fearful that the dream would prove prophetic, he sent a trusted advisor, Prexaspes, to assassinate Bardiya.

Shortly thereafter, two Median brothers plotted a revolt. One of them, named Gaumata, bore a striking resemblance to the deceased Bardiya, and since his murder had been kept a secret, they declared him to be Bardiya, younger brother of Cambyses, and made a claim on the kingship. He sweetened his move by granting a relief from all taxes for three years, and the Persians largely accepted him both as Bardiya and as their king. Hearing of this, Cambyses was greatly distressed, for he realized that the dream had not been in reference to Bardiya, but to the imposter, and he mourned his rash murder of his own brother. He prepared to march from Egypt back to Persia to confront the usurper, but along the way he took a wound in the leg that turned gangrenous, and three weeks later he died in Agbatana.[51]

Although Cambyses confessed on his deathbed what he had done and urged his nobles to deliver Persia from the hands of the Median imposters, most would not believe them when they announced that the new king was not Bardiya. He maintained the rule for seven months, with none being willing to stand against him nor apparently able to prove that he was not the younger brother of the king, for he kept to himself and avoided contact with the

advisors and courtiers. The point was finally decided with the help of one of Cambyses's wives, now the wives of the imposter Bardiya.[52] One of these women was named Phaidyme, and she was the daughter of Otanes. Becoming suspicious of the fact that the supposed king never came out among his subjects, Otanes sent a message to his daughter reminding her that the Median Bardiya was missing his ears, and entreating her to feel for ears the next time she was with him to ascertain whether he was Bardiya, the son of Cyrus, or Bardiya the Median imposter. This she did and informed her father that it was indeed the earless imposter. Armed with this information, Otanes quickly brought another six nobles together, one of whom was Darius.

The seven pledged loyalty among themselves, and while discussing the best course of action, Darius counseled that they assassinate the imposter. Darius claimed, "I thought that I alone knew this, namely that it was the Magian who was reigning as king and that [Bardiya] the son of Cyrus had brought his life to an end; and for this very reason I am come with earnest purpose to contrive death for the Magian. Since however it has come to pass that ye also know and not I alone, I think it well to act at once and not to put the matter off, for that is not the better way."[53] He urged them not to wait or bring others into the conspiracy, for the more that knew of it the more likely it was that someone would reveal the plot.

In September 522 BCE, they went to the palace court, where the guards admitted them without question due to their status. When the eunuchs of the palace attempted to stop them, the seven knifed the men, plunging the courtyard into chaos. Darius and Gobryas, one of the other conspirators, managed to rush the chambers of the Magians, "and when Gobryas was locked together in combat with the Magian, Darius stood by and was at a loss what to do, because it was dark, and he was afraid lest he should strike Gobryas. Then, seeing him standing by idle, Gobryas asked why he did not use his hands, and he said, "Because I am afraid lest I may strike thee." Gobryas answered, "Thrust with thy sword even though it stab through us both." With that, Darius was persuaded, and he thrust with his dagger and happened to hit the Magian.[54] Thus, the usurpers were killed, and the seven conspirators announced the deception and their deliverance to the Persians.

A depiction of Gaumata being trampled by Darius the Great

In more recent scholarship, a number of historians have begun to question the official history. Some speculate that the Bardiya killed by Darius and the other conspirators was indeed the son of Cyrus and the brother of Cambyses, and that Darius invented the story of the imposter Gaumata in order to justify his otherwise unwarranted coup against the royal family. Certainly, this version has some merit in the intrigues that often occurred in the courts of ancient kingdoms, and certain aspects of the traditional story seem difficult to accept. However, there is no actual evidence to back the suggestion that Darius killed the real Bardiya, as opposed to an imposter. There is only conjecture, and without any further proof, the idea is only a hypothetical one. [55]

Herodotus continues that, for at least five days after the death of the imposter, no moves were made. Neither Cambyses nor Bardiya had left behind any male heirs, and no one held any familial claims to the throne. Eventually, several days later, the seven conspirators gathered once again to discuss what would be the plans for the dispensation of the Persian Kingdom. Otanes advised that they establish a democracy and turn rule over to the people, while Megabyzus suggested an oligarchical rule by only a few nobles. Finally, Darius spoke, advocating that they remain with a monarchal rule by a single man, and arguing that any change to an experimental new

system would only destabilize the kingdom at a tenuous moment and leave them open to destruction.

The other four men of the group agreed with Darius. Otanes, realizing that they must choose one of the seven to be king in some fashion or other, withdrew himself from contention, saying that he desired not to rule or to be ruled, and that he would lay no claim to a chance at kingship if he could remain free from the rule of the others. They agreed, and so his house remained independent under the Persian Empire and only submitted to rule in those things which they themselves decided.

Meanwhile, the other six decided that one of them would be the man to become king, but that no matter who gained that honor, all of them would still enjoy special privileges and honors from the king at his court. They decided that "the man whose horse should first neigh at sunrise in the suburb of the city when they were mounted upon their horses, he should have the kingdom."[56] When they had come to this conclusion, Darius went to his best horseman and groom, Oibares, who kept his stables for him, and told Oibares of the decision of the assembly. Oibares assured Darius that no other man should be king than he, and he contrived to leave the scent of the favorite mare of Darius's stallion in the place where the contest was to take place.

When Darius's horse caught the scent, he neighed eagerly, and the moment was punctuated by lightning and thunder. As a result, Darius was declared the king of the great Persian Empire just as it was nearing the height of its territory and power. Far from being ashamed of the trick, Darius saw it as a testament to his resourcefulness and cunning, and he had a carving of a man on horseback placed in the spot where his horse had neighed, with an inscription that read, "Darius son of Hystaspes by the excellence of his horse and of his horse-keeper Oibares obtained the kingdom of the Persians."[57]

Darius was crowned in a public ceremony at the ancient capital of Pasargadae and then moved to Ecbatana. From there, he set about repairing and consolidating his kingdom. He had inscribed, "The temples which Gaumâta, the Magian, had destroyed, I restored to the people, and the pasture lands, and the herds and the dwelling places, and the houses which Gaumâta, the Magian, had taken away."[58]

He also moved to establish an even firmer right to rule by aligning himself closely with Cyrus the Great and several of his key nobles. He had long claimed ancestry with the Achaemenid Tribe, the same family that produced

Cyrus, and now he married one of Cyrus's daughters, Atossa, who had been the wife of her brother Cambyses as well. Atossa was his favorite wife, and his sons by her became his heirs. Darius was also the first husband of Artystone, the younger daughter of Cyrus. Some of the other wives he took included Parmys, the daughter of Bardiya, Phaidyme, the daughter of Otanes, an unnamed daughter of Gobryas, and several other daughters of the noble families, tying him yet closer to their families. In total, Darius produced at least 12 children with his various wives.[59]

Darius and Persepolis

Darius spent the earliest years of his rule stymieing revolts across the Persian territory, and he appointed satraps (local governors) to oversee the maintenance of order and collection of taxes in the diverse regions of the empire. Realizing that many of their subject peoples were just as advanced as the Persians, these satraps served as representatives of the empire but otherwise allowed local customs and laws to continue existing, as long as they swore obedience to the Persian king and paid their taxes. Darius also ordered the construction of an extensive network of roads that expedited communication and trade across his realm.

10 years after Pasargadae was founded by Cyrus, Darius I initiated a new era marked by the transfer of the Achaemenid capital to Persepolis. Historical records indicate that under Darius I the proto-Elamite city of Susa grew in splendor, becoming an imperial capital along with Persepolis. At Susa, a great number of building foundations and the remains of massive columns attest to the presence of one of the largest palatial cities of Persia, equal in grandeur to Persepolis.[60]

It was also during this time that the importance of other parts of Mesopotamia gradually declined, with the Persian lands in modern Iran serving as the new center of cultural and political hegemony in central Asia. Nonetheless, even as the Persians were building great cities and gardens, they were still essentially a nomadic people. Like many groups in modern-day Iran, Persian communities would spend the winter months tending to their herds on the plains, and spend the hot summer months in the cool of the mountains.[61] For the Greeks, the Persians' nomadic lifestyle was a cause for mockery – escaping from the summer heat was taken as evidence of Persian unmanliness.[62] What the Greeks never understood, though, was that traveling was a key part of the Persian way of life. Their nomadic traditions

always remained even after the construction of their cities – they were as at home in a tent as they were in the monumental structures of urban centers. Even around great settlements like Persepolis, there would have been a city of tents for those that came and went from the hinterland. Within these tents, one can imagine that ancient Persian life would not be too dissimilar to the kinds of images that can be seen today: cooking, the rearing of animals, the collecting of foodstuffs, and the weaving of clothing and carpets.

Hansueli Krapf's picture of the ruins of Darius's palace

Elnaz Sabar's picture of the ruins of Tachara, Darius's palace

From Persepolis, the Persian kings managed their vast empire, and they were unique in how they envisaged how an empire should be run. Compared to the general consensus of the ancient world, in which cultures would seek to conquer, obliterate, and rebuild according to their own terms, this process was not the case with Persia, where political objectives were ensured through tolerance of cultural diversity. If subject nations paid their taxes and tribute to the Persian king, that was all that was required for them to continue living according to their own customs and cultural setting.

To avoid confusing babble, a common language was adopted during ceremonies and official acts: Old Persian. By using a language that they themselves had to study and learn, the Persians once again displayed their desire to create a common world that all would be able to belong to. Old Persian was the official language of the Persian bureaucracy – an important step between the creation of an empire encompassing many peoples to a state composed of a single people.[63]

The Persian representation of the empire as being multifaceted and tolerant of diversity was a dramatic departure from the imperial precedents of their forbearers. The subjects of earlier empires, such as of the Babylonian and Assyrian Empires, had also spoken and written many languages, but when it came to putting inscriptions into palaces and monuments of the rulers the inscriptions were that of the rulers. In this way, the identity of the empire was expressed in the terms of the rulers. The languages of the Achaemenid inscriptions, by contrast, were unprecedented symbols of the relationships between rulers and the ruled, as they were frequently provided in both the official Old Persian language and the languages of their vassal states, namely Elamite and Akkadian.[64]

In Persia, if someone wanted to offer tribute to a deity, they would have been hard pressed to do so because there were no temples. All over Persia, altars have been found standing alone on open hilltops, and the traces left by fires during sacrifices can still be found. Along with other evidence, these have contributed to historians' understanding of the Persian religion.

For the Persians, all of creation was divine – the sky, the earth, and all of its elements. The Persians considered natural phenomena, such as water, wind, earth, and fire, as sacred attributes.[65] Hence, sacrifices were not held in an enclosed temple, but outside under the open sky. They offered their sacrifices

to the sun, the sky, the moon, the earth, and fire. The earliest believers may have worshiped these as deities, thanks to their association with some of the most fundamental aspects of daily life.

However, around the 8th century BCE, fundamental changes occurred in religious beliefs across the region, as demonstrated in the *Shahnameh* (the "Book of Kings") – an epic history of the Iranian people written sometime in the late first millennium CE by the Persian poet Ferdowsi. In this, it is made perfectly clear that these people had begun to believe in a sort of monotheism, which had been reformed and made more ethical by Zoroaster (Zarathustra) sometime during this time.[66] Although little is known of Zoroaster's life, other than that he was Persian, his teachings were not actually compiled and documented until as late as the third century CE – many centuries after his death. Nonetheless, his teachings of a dualistic religion, and of the eternal conflict between good/truth and evil/deception, had a profound impact on Persian society. Their faith was directed towards the worship of a single deity known as Ahura Mazda, who incarnated the supreme good. Other deities were reinterpreted as being nothing more than demons and devils.

A depiction of Zoroastrian symbols

Zoroastrianism became the principal religion of the Achaemenid dynasty. On the southern retaining wall of the acropolis terrace, there are two inscriptions that describe the extent and nature of its connection to Persian royal power. Both are written in the Aryan alphabet, a script created under

the orders of King Darius I to be used for Achaemenid royal inscriptions. These attest to the importance of Ahura Mazda to the rulers of Persepolis.[67] Ahura Mazda was the principle Zoroastrian god, the lord of wisdom who was worshiped at fire temples. However, the Persians did not force the people of their empire to believe in Ahura Mazda. They allowed freedom of worship; sacrifices could be dedicated to any god they wished. The Jewish book of Ezra offers an independent account, in which the Persians are praised for liberating the Jews and allowing them to practice their religion freely.[68]

By allowing subject nations to live their own lives, the Persians ensured that a multiethnic and multilingual empire flourished in relative peace for 250 years. That said, it obviously took more than tolerance to maintain control over a territory that stretched nearly 3,000 miles from west to east. Empires need an infrastructure in order to maintain control.

50 miles outside of Persepolis, carved into the side of a hill, is an ancient Persian road leading to the city, and the sides of the road are up to 30 feet high.[69] Such feats of engineering were repeated across the empire, where a network of roads and highways allowed the Persians to get information, people, and materials from one corner of the empire to wherever the king was as quickly as possible. Even the Greeks could not fail to be impressed by the Persian road system, which stretched from Persepolis to Susa, and to Ecbatana via Pasargadae, and then 1,500 miles to the west to Ephesus on the Mediterranean.[70] Roads also went east to India. The Greeks were particularly amazed by the messengers that traveled along these roads, keeping the Persian kings at Persepolis informed of everything that occurred in the empire. The great Greek historian Herodotus wrote that “no mortal thing travels faster than these Persian couriers.”[71]

Such speed was possible because of another Persian innovation: the staging post. Thanks to this system, a messenger would ride on one horse and be able to quickly change animals at these garrisons located approximately every 20 miles along the highways before continuing their journey straight away.[72] Manned by Persian soldiers, the staging posts also ensured that for the first time in antiquity, traders and travelers could move around a vast tract of land in relative safety.

Much is known about the nature and structure of imperial power through the art discovered in the city. Archaeological investigations discovered two particularly interesting sculptured scenes showing the royal audience, one of

which is stored in the Iran National Museum and the other in the Persepolis Treasury. Both of these had originally ornamented the central façade of the Apadana stairways but were later removed to the treasury for unknown reasons.[73] The king appointed members of his family or his most trusted men to select positions. King Darius I is displayed enthroned beneath a canopy, and the heir to the throne, Xerxes, stands alongside several senior officials behind him. One of these officials is likely Pharnaces, the son of Arsames and the chief economic official, who was responsible for the payment of food gifts to the residents and visitors of the city.[74] The master of ceremonies stood before the throne and reported on the proceedings of the festivals. Ushers are depicted introducing the groups of gift-bearing delegations as they enter.

The exchange of gifts was, therefore, a key element in the Persian mechanisms of power and royal ideology, and the Apadana served as the principle location at which this took place.[75] It was, therefore, no surprise that Alexander the Great targeted this structure in particular to be destroyed.

One particularly interesting inscription discovered in the Queen’s Quarters indicated that there might have been an element of competition when it came to a ruler’s succession. Describing the ascension of Xerxes to the Persian throne after the death of Darius I, it reads, “My father Darius had other sons, but – thus was Ahuramazda's desire – my father Darius made me the largest after himself. When my father Darius went away from the throne, by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king on my father's throne.”[76]

Researchers from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago began to excavate the acropolis in 1931, and in 1933 they discovered fragments of tablets in two rooms of a gatehouse at the edge of the stone terrace. These became known as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, as they had been discovered in the foundations of the ruined fortification wall that once surrounded the terrace. 30,000 fragments and whole tablets were found, which together provide one of the few sources of information about the workings of the empire that were written by the Persians themselves – information that we would otherwise never have access to. They were written in several languages, and composed of four main types of document: cuneiform texts in the Elamite language with impressions of seals; documents written in the Aramaic language and script also with seal impressions; pieces with seal impressions but no text; and various miscellaneous and unique

pieces in Greek, Phrygian, Akkadian, and the only tablet written in Old Persian ever discovered. Like a treasure trove of coins, these were stored together in antiquity and found together in modern times.

Darius the Great's seal

What do these tablets tell people about Persepolis? They were not about the deeds and characters of kings, or armies on the march, or the eunuchs and harem intrigues, or other things that Hellenistic writers and artists were interested in. They are mostly the receipts and invoices of the empire during a narrow time of fewer than 20 years around 500 BCE.[77] More specifically, they are the record of one particular aspect of the Persian Empire: the provision of food by a centralized body. They describe transactions involving a range of grains, beer, wine, animals, fruits, and vegetables for people that were on the Persian government's payrolls, including workers, craftsmen, clerks, travelers, and members of the king's own family. One records "one and a half-shekels of silver for carpenters making sculptures," and another details "one jug of wine each to the seventy-four Syrian laborers working on the columned hall."[78]

With their road infrastructure, the Persians could establish an extensive trading network across their empire, through which they acquired the luxury goods to maintain the loyalty of their elite. The purpose of luxury at Persepolis was mainly linked to their perceptions of power and the

propaganda of kingship. To have superfluous articles of expensive clothing, or to have one's palace strewn with textiles, an expression of power and wealth through the conspicuous consumption of material goods.[79]

In that vein, one custom that both fascinated and appalled the Greeks was the Persian feast. Most of what is known of the Persian feast comes from Greek sources, who described the opulence of the objects used, and the amount of drinking that was an essential part of the proceedings. The Persians lived according to a principle of telling the truth – something that the Greeks, begrudgingly, admired in them. Drinking during feasts had an important social role; they tended to get very drunk, because they believed that only in doing so they would tell the truth and be able to effectively settle arguments.[80] Feasting brought groups together as a community, with everyone partaking in the same food and engaging in the same experience.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Persians were renowned for their luxury. Records and archaeological evidence indicate that they purchased spices, gold, purple dyes, and reams of the finest textiles. Although all that remains today are bare stone pillars and walls, the halls and palaces of Persepolis were once splendidly decorated in sumptuous textiles.[81] These fabrics were a way of expressing status and would have been found on walls, all over the floors, and the furniture.[82]

The cost of the site must have been immeasurable, judging from its immense scale, the opulence of its decoration, and luxury of the ceremonies and events that took place there. It seems the Persians were able to afford it through state investment, and making sure the fertile region of the Persian homeland flourished under the Achaemenid rule. Agriculture served as their main form of income, and the Persepolis Fortification Tablets indicate that grain and other produce served as the primary means of paying taxes.

In addition to the tributes and taxes paid by their vassals within the empire, the Persian royalty profited from the extensive trade that took place across their realm along the land-based routes known as the Silk Road and maritime trade routes via the Persian Gulf. Due to their position, the Persians frequently acted as middlemen in transactions between their neighbors. Their economy made use of a system of standardized coinage, and they even had a form of banking system by which the market could be made secure.[83]

Gift giving was how the Persian kings reinforced the loyalty of their subjects, but they also had other, less benign, ways of exercising power. A

bas-relief at Behistun, in northwestern Iran, shows the Persian king at his most ruthless. King Darius the Great is shown enslaving those who threatened his throne, and the prominent position of the image served as a public warning to those who may have considered resisting him.[84] Many ancient Greek accounts also suggest that the Persians ruled with an iron fist, including descriptions of how the Persians cut off the limbs and even noses of their prisoners.

However, the bas-reliefs at Persepolis seem to present a very different perspective. There the figures do not display the expected rigidity of court rule or enslavement; instead, they appear relaxed, chatting and encouraging one another. They are depicted as holding one another's hands or shoulders, providing an image of peace and harmony. There are no battle scenes depicted in the city, and no violence in any form is demonstrated. Tolerant, peaceful, and wealthy, the Achaemenid kings believed that they were the masters of all that they surveyed.

Rebellions and Reforms

Darius initially faced serious dissent in various provinces, and in some cases the provincial governors were fomenting open rebellion.

For example, the satrap of Lydia, appointed by Cyrus, was a man named Orates. He had a poor reputation as a despot and a ruthless tyrant already, but shortly after Darius's ascension, the new king sent some instructions to Orates by messenger that displeased Orates. Rather than follow the orders, Orates ordered the messenger waylaid on the road on his way back to Darius. Both the messenger and his horse were killed, and their bodies were secretly buried in the mountains. As Darius awaited the return of the messenger in vain, he began to suspect that Orates was responsible for the man's disappearance. When assured of this, Darius planned retribution.

He called together a large group of his nobles and informed them that he wished Orates to be brought to him, dead or alive. Many clamored for the job, and so Darius chose by lot that the mission should fall to one named Bagoas. Bagoas requested that Darius write, sign and seal a number of orders that varied in their importance. Armed with these, he set out for Orates's court, introduced himself as a representative of the king, and gave out the least significant of the orders that he had brought. He remained for some time with Orates, slowly issuing commands of higher and higher intensity to the

guards at the palace, until they were accustomed to obeying him and considered him an authority of the king. Finally, when he was convinced that he had their obedience, he issued the edict to depose Orates and to behead him, and both of these orders were obeyed just as before.[85]

Other revolts were more overt. Upon taking the throne, it soon became clear that, pretender or not, Bardiya had maintained a certain amount of support. In Elam and Babylonia, the people rebelled. The Elamite rebellion was led by a leader named Aschina, but after his capture and execution, the remainder of the rioters lost their motivation and stood down.

The Babylonian rebellion lasted for three months, led by a man named Nidintu-Bel. Darius mentioned the confrontation in an inscription that was part of a large rock relief on Mount Behistun. Now known as the Behistun Inscription, the text is the Persian equivalent of the Rosetta Stone, as it provided its contents in three different languages (Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian), which provided historians, archeologists and linguists the key to understanding cuneiform script. Darius wrote of the Babylonian Rebellion, "The army of Nidintu-Bêl held the Tigris; there it took its stand, and on account of the [river] was unfordable. Thereupon I supported my army on [inflated] skins, others I made dromedary-borne, for the rest I brought horses. Ahuramazda brought me help; by the grace of Ahuramazda we crossed the Tigris. Then did I utterly overthrow that host of Nidintu-Bêl… After that I marched against Babylon. But before I reached Babylon, that Nidintu-Bêl came with a host and offered battle at a city called Zâzâna, on the Euphrates. Then we joined battle. Ahuramazda brought me help; by the grace of Ahuramazda did I utterly overthrow the host of Nidintu-Bêl. The enemy fled into the water; the water carried them away... Then did Nidintu-Bêl flee with a few horsemen into Babylon. Thereupon I marched to Babylon. By the grace of Ahuramazda I took Babylon, and captured Nidintu-Bêl. Then I slew that Nidintu-Bêl in Babylon."[86]

Just as he put an end to Nidintu-Bêl, Darius learned of a revolution in Bactria, a province that he had considered to be a staunch ally. Soon, smaller revolts broke out in a number of provinces, including Persis, Media, Parthia, Assyria, and Egypt, as well as a second insurgence in both Elam and Babylon. Darius named the ringleaders of the revolutions and their provinces in the inscription as well, and one by one, they were defeated.

In total, Darius fought over 19 battles to crush rebellions around the empire

in the first year of his rule alone, but while he had lost the support of many people under Persian rule, the army remained fiercely loyal to him, as did his closest nobles and advisors.[87] He would need their help at some point in late 522 BCE or early 521 BCE, when an Egyptian going by the title Pharaoh Ptubastis III led an uprising against the Persian rule established by Cambyses. Cambyses had left a man by the name of Aryandes as the satrap of Egypt, but he was a cruel despot who had levied unrealistic taxes, and in frustration, many Egyptians joined Ptubastis. Darius immediately marched at the head of his army into Egypt, arriving just after the period of mourning for the sacred Herald of Ptah bull, Apis. Apis was a symbol for courageous heat, great strength, and fighting spirit, and the Apis bull became closely tied to the symbol of the Egyptian kings. Every generation, a bull calf was chosen as Apis, the manifestation of the deity Ptah. This calf needed to possess particular markings, and when found, he was brought to the Temple of Ptah and given a harem of cows.

When Darius arrived, he tactfully observed all the rites and customs of the mourning of Apis, and then declared that he would give a gift of 100 talents to the man who found the next Apis. The Egyptians were so pleased by his behavior that they rushed to support him, and the rebellion faded away with no organized bloodshed at all.[88]

Back in Babylon, yet another claimant to kingship also began to stir up the local population. A man by the name of Arakha claimed to be the second son of Nabonidus, former king of Babylon. He was quickly put down by Intaphernes, one of the six conspirators who had helped place Darius on the throne and afterward had been elevated to the high position of the Darius's personal bow carrier. However, despite the loss of Arakha, it seems that the Babylonians remained intent on rebellion, for a subsequent siege to the city lasted for a year and eight months. Finally, the battle was won by the contrivance and sacrifice of Zopyrus, who was the son of Megabyzus, one of the other six conspirators.

Zopyrus mutilated himself as the Persians might a criminal, shaving his head, cutting off his own nose and ears, and whipping himself viciously. When he had done this, he went before Darius to present his plan. Darius was horrified seeing his friend's son in such a condition, and he demanded to know who had maltreated him, but Zopyrus told him that he had himself done so. He told the Persian king he would help Darius take Babylon through

his torments, yet he knew that if he had told Darius his plan beforehand, Darius would not have allowed him to do it. He then told the king his plan, explaining, “I shall go straightway as a deserter to the wall; and I shall say to them that I suffered this treatment at thy hands: and I think that when I have convinced them that this is so, I shall obtain the command of a part of their forces… Then after the twentieth day at once bid the rest of the army make an attack on the wall all round, and set the Persians, I pray thee, by those gates which are called the gate of Belos and the gate of Kissia: for, as I think, when I have displayed great deeds of prowess, the Babylonians will entrust to me, besides their other things, also the keys which draw the bolts of the gates. Then after that it shall be the care of myself and the Persians to do that which ought to be done."[89]

Zopyrus was eminently successful in his scheme, and indeed the Babylonians entrusted him with command of their forces and the keys to the city gates. On the appointed day, Darius ordered the attack, and Zopyrus calmly opened the gates and allowed the Persians in. Darius punished the city by tearing down its walls, and he impaled 3,000 of its leading men. The Babylonians had suffocated all of the women in the city in order to avoid starvation, so Darius brought women in from all the surrounding cities and re-established Babylon with them. Darius also honored Zopyrus exceedingly for the role that he had played in the city’s capture. He considered no Persian to ever have provided such loyalty to the king, and he gave Zopyrus rule over Babylon for as long as he should live, free of all tribute, though he often said that he would “rather that Zopyros were free from the injury than that he should have twenty Babylons added to his possession in addition to that one which he had.”[90]

Despite Intaphernes’s good service in the initial campaign against the rebels, he was doomed not to enjoy much of Darius’s rule. The seven nobles had made a pact that gave them all special rights, and one of these was access to the king whenever they wished, except when he was with his wife. Subsequently, Intaphernes appeared before the palace gates desiring to see Darius. When the gatekeepers tried to stop him, informing him that Darius was with his wife, he thought that they were lying and grew enraged. In a fury, he drew his sword, cut off the ears and noses of the two men, then hung their amputated pieces on a string around their necks and stormed away from the palace.

When they presented themselves before Darius in their pitiful state and informed him of what had happened, Darius was both angry and concerned. Worried that the seven conspirators were now reconsidering their decision and planning to move against him, he sent for each one in turn to ask if they condoned what Intaphernes had done, but all condemned the act. When he was assured that Intaphernes had acted alone, he seized the man and all of his male family members, condemning them to death. Upon hearing this, Intaphernes's wife came before the doors of Darius's court, weeping and pleading for the lives of her relatives.

Darius took pity on her and granted her the ability to save one relative, naturally assuming that she would choose either her husband or her son. After long thought, she returned with the answer that she wished to spare her brother. When Darius asked her curiously why she had not picked her husband or son, to which she replied, "O king, I might, if heaven willed, have another husband and other children, if I should lose these; but another brother I could by no means have, seeing that my father and my mother are no longer alive. This was in my mind when I said those words." Impressed by her reasoning, Darius not only spared her brother, but also gave her son his life as well. Intaphernes and the other men were killed, and so one of the seven original conspirators lost his life very shortly into Darius's reign.[91]

By the end of 521 BCE, all uprisings had been subdued, and the Persian Empire was again at peace, and the new Great King turned his attention to conquest. Cyrus had attempted a campaign against India and had gone as far as the Indus River and placed a few Indian tribes under Persian control, but he had abandoned his grand plan of conquest in favor of taking Babylon, a much more desirable prize. Now Darius resolved to revisit Cyrus's plan. In 518 BCE, Darius conquered another province in India, one that he called Hindush and which seems to correspond to the area of the Indus Valley.[92] However, there are certain discrepancies in the historical record, and the area may instead be referring to the region of Taxila and the Western Punjab. Archeologists have discovered pottery fragments in these areas that reflect an Achaemenid style and indicate the likely presence of a satrapy capital in the area.[93]

Darius appears to have had no desire to go further on that particular campaign, but since he was curious where the Indus reached the sea and wanted to collect such information for future expeditions, he sent a man

named Scylax of Caryanda with a number of ships to explore its length. Scylax sailed down the Indus and into the Indian Ocean, then made his way around the Arabian Peninsula, up the Red Sea, and into Egypt on a journey that lasted 30 months and that would not become commonplace until at least the time of the Ptolemaic Empire about 200 years later. His exploration appears to have had the desired effect, for some time after his return and report, Darius returned and added the lands that Scylax had explored to the territory of Persia.[94]

Darius next laid his sights on the northern borders of his kingdoms. In particular, he wished to further subdue the Scythians, a group of nomadic tribal warriors occupying the Pontic steppe land of Eastern Europe and western Asia above the Black Sea. They had previously caused difficulties for Darius by conducting raids against Media and stirring up unrest on the borders. Their location also provided a threat to continued commerce between Persia and the Asian nations. As a result, in 513 BCE, Darius launched an invasion against Scythia, hoping to subdue the various tribes and subvert the threat that they posed.

A curious incident, echoed later in a similar story surrounding Xerxes's crossing of the Hellespont, demonstrated the more merciless side of Darius's character. A Persian noble by the name of Oiobazus came to Darius to beg that one of his three sons might remain behind in Persia, for all three were members of Darius's army and Oiobazus feared that he would lose them all in the war with the dangerous Scythians. Darius responded that Oiobazus was a friend, and that the request he made was a reasonable one. Thus, rather than leaving behind one son for the man, he promised that he would leave all three. He kept his promise and ordered all three sons executed, and he also had their bodies left behind with their stricken father.

In order to reach the Scythian homeland, Darius needed to find some way to cross the Black Sea, at that time known as the Pontus. He created a precedent for future rulers by building a pontoon bridge made of boats at the Bosporus Straits. Herodotus reckoned that over 600 boats were present at the invasion launch point. All along the route, he left pillars of stone commemorating the movements of the army. [95]

While marching toward Scythia, Darius encountered several other dangerous tribes of the steppe lands. One of these, the Sacae, gave him the opportunity to display some of that cunning which had first made him king.

Upon approaching the Sacae, “he found himself in danger of being surrounded by three armies. Therefore, he advanced with all possible speed against the army which was nearest to him and defeated it in battle. Then he dressed his men in the clothes and weapons of the Sacae, and marched against another army of the Sacae, slowly and confidently as if to meet their friends. But as soon as they came within a spear's length of them, the Persians, according to their orders, instead of friendly greetings, fell upon the enemy and cut them to pieces. After having defeated two divisions of the enemy in this way, Dareius advanced against the third, but they had already heard about the fate of the other two armies and surrendered to him without risking a battle.”[96]

Finally, Darius made his way into the lands of Scythia. Though the people known to the outside world as the Scythians were actually composed of a number of disparate nomadic tribes, they proved themselves far more cooperative than the supposedly more advanced civilizations of the Greek mainland, for rather than continuing their spats and disagreements among themselves, they managed to ally together and form a united resistance to the Persian advance.

The Scythians were well aware that they would not survive a pitched battle with the vast Persian army, so instead they conducted guerilla retreats, harassing the Persian forces while Darius chased them deeper and deeper into Scythian territory. As they continued to evade him, he grew increasingly frustrated and finally sent a message to their king, attempting to goad them into battle: "Thou most wondrous man, why dost thou fly forever, when thou mightiest do of these two things one?—if thou thinkest thyself able to make opposition to my power, stand thou still and cease from wandering abroad, and fight; but if thou dost acknowledge thyself too weak, cease then in that case also from thy course, and come to speech with thy master, bringing to him gifts of earth and water." To this the king of the Scythians Idanthyrsos made answer thus: "My case, O Persian, stands thus:—Never yet did I fly because I was afraid… [but] we have neither cities nor land sown with crops, about which we should fear lest they should be captured or laid waste.”[97]

Though he could not bring them to open battle, Darius still held the initiative, and as he pushed further into Scythian land, he destroyed their best grazing land and conquered several of their most valuable allies. Still, as the days passed and the Persians began to suffer from fatigue, sickness, and lack

of provisions, the importance of a decisive battle began to dwindle. Darius decided that he would not go further east than the Volga River, and he stopped his march there and built eight large forts, each about eight miles apart. As he planned for his retreat, he feared being pursued by the Scythians and his soldiers being picked off as they withdrew, so with the help of Gobryas, he concocted another scheme to protect the march. According to the ancient writer Polyaenus, "He directed his tents to be left standing, just as they had been for some time before. In the tents there were many wounded soldiers, asses, mules and dogs; and a great many fires were lighted, which those who were left behind were ordered to keep burning constantly throughout the night. The Scythians, seeing the fires and the tents, and hearing the confused noise of the animals, assumed that the Persians were still encamped; whereas they had in fact secured their retreat."[98]

The campaign cannot be totally labeled a success, as Darius failed to defeat the Scythians and was forced to withdraw with no new subjugated provinces to add to the Persian Empire. However, he did push the Scythians back and laid waste to much of the land in between, effectively stopping Scythian raids on Persian territory for the future.[99]

With the kingdom settling into its new rule and the borders under control, Darius turned his attention to the administrative organization of the empire. Administrative reform is not the most glamorous aspect of history, but it is a crucial and often overlooked task. Many great conquerors throughout history have possessed the skill to expand their territory, but far fewer could keep it. Alexander the Great managed to take much of the known world, including the great Persian Empire, but he remained plagued by rebellions and upon his death the entire kingdom fell apart. Cyrus had already laid the foundation for a successful political system, but Darius quickly saw to its improvement. The empire was already divided into different regions, and Darius continued this process still further, outlining 20 great districts called satrapies, each under the rule of an individual govern, the satrap of that district.

Most satraps were directly chosen by Darius himself and were generally members of loyal noble families, particularly those from the six men who had helped Darius become king. Even so, Darius put safeguards into place to avoid any one satrap gaining too much power. Every satrap was divided into smaller districts, and every one of those had its own governor, chosen either by the higher regional satrap or by Darius and the royal court. Every single

satrap and governor had a secretary in their employ that watched over their affairs and reported back to Darius, as well as an independent treasurer and independent garrison commander. Ostensibly, these officials came under the orders of the satrap, but in reality they maintained much of their own autonomy and reported directly to the royal court. This division of power put up a barrier against a popular governor gaining the support of the people and the military at the same time. It also split the powers of administration between separate individuals who were each capable of informing to Darius on the others.

Darius could attribute plenty of his successes to his detailed decisions regarding each province. Rather than laying blanket taxes over the kingdom and hastening to other business, Darius fixed the level of tribute of each satrapy so that it would not overwhelm the production capabilities of that particular region. He also made the product demanded in tribute different for each province. Some paid in gold, some in silver, and some in the most abundant commodity of their area, including crops and livestock. One historian explained, "One satrapy, which comprised a country famous for its horses, was obliged to furnish one white horse for every day in the year. This made three hundred and sixty annually, that being the number of days in the Persian year. Such a supply, furnished yearly, enabled the king soon to have a very large troop of white horses; and as the horses were beautifully caparisoned, and the riders magnificently armed, the body of cavalry thus formed was one of the most splendid in the world."[100]

The Persian economy also benefited from reforms set into motion by Darius. Though the exact date of introduction is unknown, Darius introduced a universal Persian currency, called a daric, sometime before 500 BCE, and through this he was able to regulate and influence trade and commerce in all corners of his great empire. The silver daric was the main form of currency, while minting of gold darics was reserved exclusively for the king. Persia grew to such strength, wealth and power, that foreign nations also began to recognize and accept the daric, with archeological sites revealing gold and silver darics as far flung as central and Eastern Europe, and the introduction of the daric quickly boosted Persia's international trade.

Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.'s picture of a daric featuring Darius

Due to the growth of such trade, Persia needed a travel system that could support it, so Darius commissioned the reorganization and reconstruction of the Royal Road, a total distance of 2,699 kilometers. The road spanned from Asian Minor in Lydia, through the Cicilian Gates to Nineveh and Babylon, there splitting into two tributaries, one of which led to Ecbatana, while the other took travelers to Susa and finally ended in Persepolis. Darius's Royal Road was such a grand construction and made with such quality that it remained in use until Roman times, and a bridge that was part of the road is still standing in Turkey.[101] It even worked its way into cultural lore, for a story says that when King Ptolemy of Egypt asked the mathematician Euclid if there was an easier way to learn math, Euclid responded that "there is no Royal Road to geometry." [102]

Along with this road came the establishment of an organized, governmental postal institution of impressive ability, called the Angarium. The journey from Sardis to Susa took 90 days by foot, but the postal couriers traveled this distance in nine days, using outposts strategically placed with fresh messengers and fresh horses, thereby creating a flow of news and information unlike anything the ancient world had previously seen. Herodotus praised the messengers extensively in his *Histories*, one line of which was even pulled as the unofficial motto of the modern United States Postal Service: "Now there is nothing mortal which accomplishes a journey with more speed than these messengers, so skillfully has this been invented by the Persians: for they say that according to the number of days of which the entire journey consists, so many horses and men are set at intervals, each man and horse appointed for a

day's journey. These neither snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness of night prevents from accomplishing each one the task proposed to him, with the very utmost speed. The first then rides and delivers the message with which he is charged to the second, and the second to the third; and after that it goes through them handed from one to the other, as in the torch-race among the Hellenes, which they perform for Hephaestus. This kind of running of their horses the Persians call Angarium."[103]

The expansion of Persia's wealth brought a corresponding expansion of its grandeur, and in that vein, Darius implemented several building projects throughout his reign, some practical and some symbolic. One of the most impressive of these for the era in which it was created was the completion of a canal that linked the Red Sea to the Nile River, allowing shipping to reach the Mediterranean. Herodotus claimed that this was first opened during the rule of Darius in 497 BCE.[104] Alongside this, he built and expanded several roads in Egypt to further improve trade.

Many of his other projects involved aggrandizing the key cities of Persia, including Pasargadae, Susa, Babylon and Persepolis. In Pasargadae, he mainly completed buildings begun by Cyrus, including a magnificent palace. An entirely new palace structure graced the northern end of Susa, and Tachara Palace was built in Persepolis as Darius's personal exclusive residence. It was further expanded on by Darius's son and successor, Xerxes.

Culturally, Darius made no moves to impose his will upon his conquered citizens, choosing to continue the tolerant policy of Cyrus and Cambyses before him. His own religious beliefs are harder to determine, and while many scholars have speculated that he was heavily influenced by Zoroastrianism, the extent of this influence remains under debate. The only religious acknowledgements that Darius himself made involve reference to deities that are traditionally associated with Zoroastrianism, yet at the same time, several other religions of the Indo-Iranian tradition independently worshipped the same gods without having the exact same belief systems as Zoroastrianism. The god most often acknowledged and thanked by Darius was Ahura Mazda, who Darius credited in his inscriptions with his kingship and ongoing success as the ruler of Persia.

Though it would seem that Darius believed quite devoutly, his tolerance extended to other religions as well, for he supported and encouraged other faiths as long as they would remain submissive to Persian rule. He even

occasionally gave monetary gifts for the pursuit of their religions, including grants to Greek cults and the Elamite priests. He also funded the rebuilding of the Temple of Jerusalem, a project started during Cyrus's reign, and he also helped build a temple for the Egyptian god Amun.[105]

The First Persian War

In 500 BCE, the major Greek city-states Sparta and Athens were not terribly interested in the affairs of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, and for the most part, the status of the Ionian Greeks, who were under Persian control, also mattered very little to them. Sparta stood at the head of an alliance/league of Peloponnesian city-states who were more concerned with their region, while Athens had recently abolished tyranny and was learning the intricacies of democratic government.

While Athens was uninvolved, perhaps following the cue of their Athenian cousins, some of the Ionian, Aeolian, and Doric city-states in Anatolia revolted against their own tyrants, which was tantamount to rebellion against their Persian overlords. Herodotus provided the best account of the Ionian Revolt, which was largely instigated by a former tyrant named Aristagoras, who believed that a successful revolt would place him in a powerful position. Herodotus wrote, "Certain substantial citizens of Naxos, forced by the commons to leave the island, took refuge in Miletus, which had been put under Aristagoras, son of Molpagoras, as deputy governor. He was nephew and son-in-law of Histiaeus, the son of Lysagoras, who was being detained by Darius at Susa…The first thing they did when they got there was to ask Aristagoras to lend them some troops, in the hope of recovering their position at home. This suggested to Aristagoras that if he helped the exiles to return he himself would be ruler of Naxos; so using their friendship with Histiaeus to cloak his purpose, he made them an offer."

Aristagoras had a keen sense of political acumen and a feel for the times, as a large part of his strategy was to gain the favor of the Ionians Greeks by promising the reward of democracy. First, he had to abdicate his own tyranny, which he did in public fashion. According to Herodotus, "To induce the Milesians to support him, he began by professing to abdicate his tyranny in favor of a popular government, and then went on to do the same thing in the other Ionian states, where he got rid of the tyrants."

At the same time, Aristagoras knew that enticing the Ionian states to rebel would not be enough to defeat the mighty Persian Empire. For that, he would

need the support of one, or both, of the Ionian's mainland Greek cousins. However, Aristagoras' efforts to obtain the aid of Sparta and Athens against the Persians would lead to his demise and set the Athenians on a crash course with the Persians that would reach its apex at Marathon.

Perhaps owing to the fierce reputation of the Spartan warriors, or simply due to the fact that Sparta was farthest from Ionia, Aristagoras visited Sparta first to plead for assistance against the Persians. At the time, Sparta's government was a type of republican-monarchy, in which adult males had voting rights at their councils but two kings presided over the city and largely decided on affairs of state such as diplomacy and war (Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 7). When Aristagoras finally made it to Sparta, he met with the only reigning king of the time, Cleomenes, and at first tried to appeal to his patriotism, then his pride, and finally his greed. Herodotus's account of Aristagoras' plea to Cleomenes reads, "I hope Cleomenes, that you will not be too much surprised at my anxiety to visit you. The circumstances are these. That Ionians should have become slaves in place of free men is a bitter shame and grief not only to us, but to the rest of Greece, and especially to you, who are the leaders of the Greek world. We beg you, therefore, in the name of the gods of Greece, to save from slavery your Ionian kinsmen. It will be an easy task, for these foreigners have little taste for war, and you are the finest soldiers in the world. The Persian weapons are bows and short spears; they fight in trousers and turbans – that will show you how easy they are to beat! Moreover, the inhabitants of that continent are richer than all the rest of the world put together – they have everything, gold, silver, bronze, elaborately embroidered clothes and beasts of burden and slaves. All this you may have if you wish."

Cleomenes's interest was apparently piqued until Aristagoras showed him a map of the vast Achaemenid Persian Empire, to which the Spartan replied, "Your proposal to take Lacedaemonians a three months' journey from the sea is a highly improper one." Unfazed by the Spartans' denial of his proposal, Aristagoras began to sail back to Ionia, but he stopped in Athens to present the citizens of that city-state with a similar offer. Aristagoras approached the Athenians at an opportune time, as they had recently expelled their tyrant Hippias, who was supported by the Persians, so they were already inclined to campaign against them. Aristagoras used many of the same arguments he tried with the Spartans, including the weakness of the Persian military and the riches of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, but he also appealed to common

ancestry that the Athenians and Ionians shared. Herodotus noted, “In addition to this he pointed out that Miletus had been founded by Athenian settlers, so it was only natural that the Athenians, powerful as they were, should help her in her need. Once persuaded to accede to Aristagoras’ appeal, the Athenians passed a decree for the dispatch of twenty ships to Ionia, under the command of Melanthius, a distinguished Athenian.”

Athenian support for the Ionian cause was lukewarm at best, and the entire Ionian coalition soon crumbled under the weight of the mighty Persian Empire. When the Persians were finally able to reestablish their rule over the rebellious Ionian city-states, Aristagoras fled and later died in exile, and the rebellious cities, especially Miletus, suffered under brutal punitive measures. Herodotus graphically wrote about the punishment the Persians meted out to the Ionians: “Once the towns were in their hands, the best-looking boys were chosen for castration and made into eunuchs; the most beautiful girls were dragged from their homes and sent to Darius’ court, and the towns themselves, temples and all, were burnt to the ground.”

The ruthless suppression of the Ionian Revolt by the Persians proved to be the first act in the greater Greco-Persian Wars, and if the Athenians thought that their limited involvement in the affair would mitigate the ire of Darius, they were sorely mistaken. Through their involvement in the Ionian Revolt, despite the fact it was minimal for the most part, the Athenians set themselves at odds with the Persian emperor, putting them on a crash course that would culminate at the Battle of Marathon about nine years later.

An ancient Greek depiction of Darius

At the beginning of the 5th century BCE, the Greek city-states were as prone to fight each other as they were non-Greeks. The Persians on the other hand commanded the greatest empire the known world had ever witnessed, and the Greek Ionian city-states were a small fraction of the total empire, so the more distant Athenians may have appeared to the Persians as little more than minor interlopers who were playing a dangerous game that was out of their league. That said, despite the fact that the Persians in general may have disregarded any military threat that the Athenians posed, Ionia was still viewed as an important part of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.

The Athenians no doubt raised the ire of Darius I when they supported the Ionian Revolt, but their direct interference in the affairs of the Achaemenid Persian Empire was not their first transgression against the Persians. Before the Athenians inserted themselves into the Ionian Revolt, they were involved in a war with Sparta, and when that did not go well for them, they looked to Persia for an alliance. The Athenians sent envoys to the city of Sardis in Ionia

to meet with the Persian governor, Artapherenes, who requested that the Greeks give a symbolic gift of earth and water to him. Herodotus explained, "To strengthen their position they sent representatives to Sardis, in the hope of concluding an alliance with Persia. When they got there and delivered their message, Artapherenes the son of Hystaspes, the governor, asked in reply who these Athenians were that sought an alliance with Persia, and in what part of the world they lived. Then, having been told, he put the Persian case in a nutshell by remarking that, if the Athenians would signify their submission by the usual gift of earth and water, then Darius would make a pact with them; otherwise they had better go home. Eager that the pact should be concluded, the envoys acted on their own initiative and accepted Artapherenes' terms – for which they were severely censured on their return to Athens." As Herodotus wrote, the Athenian envoys were admonished for their act of obeisance towards the Persians, but the political damage had been done; the Athenians broke Persian protocol and tradition when they offered earth and water but did not give their obedience. Furthermore, around the time of the Athenian earth and water fiasco, Hippias, the tyrant who was expelled from Athens in 510 BCE, showed up in Sardis and urged Artapherenes and the Persians to restore him as tyrant of Athens (Olmstead 1948, 151-52). In fact, when the Persians finally set forward with their invasion plan of Greece, Hippias was with the Persian fleet, which indicates that the invasion was at least partially intended to restore Athens to tyranny (Doenges 1998, 2).

By breaking the standard Persian political protocol, the Athenians had placed themselves on the imperial radar of the Persians, but when they supported the Ionian Revolt, Darius I took the matter personally. The Persians were not the only one who committed atrocities during the Ionian Revolt, as a combined force of Ionian Greeks and Athenians captured and sacked the city of Sardis and reduced its temple to rubble. When Darius I learned of the Athenians role in the sack of Sardis, he exploded. According to Herodotus, "The story goes that when Darius learnt of the disaster, he did not give a thought to the Ionians, knowing perfectly well that the punishment for their revolt would come; but he asked who the Athenians were, and then, on being told, called for his bow. He took it, set an arrow on the string, shot it up into the air and cried: 'Grant, O God, that I may punish the Athenians.'"

To Darius, the matter was settled: the Athenians must be taught a lesson

and brought under the yoke of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. That said, in the ancient world, it took a lot of time and resources to plan a large-scale military campaign, and the Persian invasion of Greece was no exception. The heart of the Achaemenid Persian Empire was thousands of miles from Greece, so any major invasion would involve many logistical concerns, especially transportation of troops and resources, but Darius I was up for the challenge. The Persian army was led by the general Mardonius, who mustered his forces on land and sea in Ionia in 491 BCE, and his expedition into Greece would be the largest military expedition that world had ever seen. In fact, it was most likely intended to subjugate not only Athens but all of Greece.

From Ionia, Mardonius led the Persian army north along the Aegean coastline until they marched through Thrace and Macedonia. At this point, they encountered a storm that destroyed most of their ships. The disastrous loss of the Persian fleet only proved to be a temporary setback though, as the rich Achaemenid Persian Empire was able to muster a new army, which was led by a general named Datis. Datis was ordered by Darius I to "reduce Athens and Eretria to slavery and to bring the slaves before the king."

Datis had many advantages over the Greeks, as he commanded overwhelming naval superiority and had the military intelligence of Hippias, the former tyrant of Athens, at his disposal (Doenges 1998, 2). Instead of following Mardonius' route the previous year around the Aegean, Datis led the Persian army by ships directly across the Aegean, reducing the island of Naxos to slavery but sparing Delos.

When Datis and the Persians arrived in Greece, they first set their sights on laying waste to Eretria. According to Herodotus, the Eretrians prepared themselves for a long siege but were betrayed by some of their own people: "The Eretrians had no intention of leaving their defenses to meet the coming attack in the open; their one concern (the proposal not to abandon the town having been carried) was to defend their walls – if they could . . . then on the seventh, two well-known Eretrians, Euphorbus the son of Alcimachus and Philagrus the son of Cyneas, betrayed the town to the enemy. The Persians entered, and stripped the temples bare and burnt them in revenge for the burnt temples of Sardis, and, in accordance with Darius' orders, carried off all the inhabitants as slaves."

With Eretria reduced to rubble, Datis then turned his attention south to the

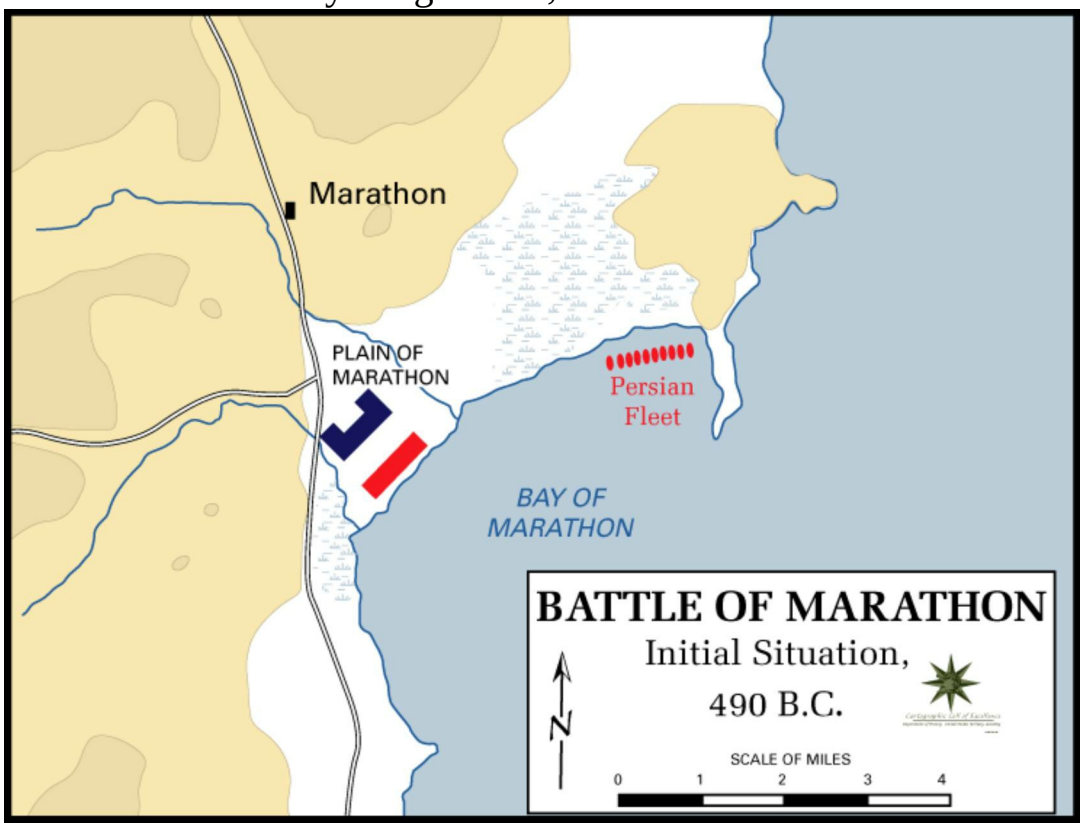
Attica peninsula and the city of Athens, but unlike the Eretrians, the Athenians would be better prepared and would leave their city to meet the Persians on the plain near Marathon.

Although Athens was a decent sized city-state for the Hellenic world, it was puny compared to the Achaemenid Persian Empire, making it impossible to make up for the numerical disparity in a number of ways. Nonetheless, Athens was still formidable. All Athenian citizens between the ages of 18-42 were eligible for military service (Sage 1996, 38), and the army was sub-divided by tribes, which were then commanded by lieutenants known as *taxiarchs* (Sage 1996, 38). Although the requirements for and basic structure of the Athenian military are known, much less is known about the men's training. During the period of the Battle of Marathon, there is no evidence for any formal training of hoplites in Athens, and the only Greek city-state where any significant training is recorded comes from Sparta (Sage 1996, 35). In other words, the Athenian military at the time of the Battle of Marathon was a sort of "home guard," where each male citizen was responsible for his part militarily and thus always prepared for war.

Herodotus is the most complete primary source concerning the Battle of Marathon, but others do exist (or at least once did) that can help complement his account. The oldest sources that depicted the Battle of Marathon were actually a series of pictures that were painted in the Poecile Stoa by the artists Micon and Paenus around 460 BCE, about 30 years after the battle (Hammond 1968, 26). Unfortunately, the pictures are no longer extant, but the Greek geographer Pausanias gave a partial description in his geographic survey of Greece: "At the end of the painting are those who fought at Marathon; the Boeotians of Plataea and the Attic contingent are coming to blows with the foreigners. In this place neither side has the better, but the centre of the fighting shows the foreigners in flight and pushing one another into the morass, while at the end of the painting are the Phoenician ships, and the Greeks killing the foreigners who are scrambling into them." (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, I, 5.3). Pausanias's description of the Poecile Stoa is useful because it corroborates Herodotus' accounts, namely that the Plataeans were the only other Greeks besides the Athenians who fought the Persians. It also indicates the chaos of the Persians' retreat.

The Battle of Marathon itself is believed to have taken place in September 490 BCE, and it is also thought to be the first amphibious battle in world

history (Doenges 1998, 4). The Persians landed their invasion force near Marathon because it was believed to be good ground for them to maneuver their cavalry, which the Persian commander Datis believed would give him the edge over the Greek hoplites (Hammond 1968, 33). Although the plain around Marathon was good ground for cavalry and was no doubt a large part of the Persian decision to land there, its proximity to Eretria also played a role. Herodotus wrote, “The part of Attic territory nearest Eretria – and also the best ground for cavalry to maneuver in – was at Marathon. To Marathon, therefore, Hippias the son of Pisistratus directed the invading army, and the Athenians, as soon as the news arrived, hurried to meet it. The Athenian troops were commanded by ten generals, of whom the tenth was Miltiades.”



Disposition of the forces at Marathon

The appearance of the former Athenian tyrant, Hippias, is also important because he apparently provided useful intelligence to Datis and the Persians that revealed Marathon to be the best place for cavalry operations. It was also close to the recently conquered Eretria, and the close proximity to Eretria was logistically important to the Persians and their potential success not only at Marathon but also if they were to subject all of Attica and possibly Greece itself. Since the Persian army was so far removed from the nearest

Achaemenid colonies (which were across the Aegean in Ionia), they were forced to use Eretria as a temporary base and source of their supply lines (Hammond 1968, 32). The short distance between Eretria and Marathon across the bay also provided a safe and quick route for the Persians to move goods and men.

As a result, the Persians assembled their army near Marathon, but the exact size of the army is still open to conjecture. Unfortunately, Herodotus never gave a number for the combatants in the Persian army – only ships – so modern historians are forced to make educated guesses based on the size of the field, the number that Herodotus listed as killed, and the number of Persian ships. A recent study estimates that the number of Persian fighting men may have been around 12,000-15,000 men, which would not be much more than the army the Greeks fielded at Marathon (Doenges 1998, 6), but earlier studies, such as Hammond's, places the total number of the Persian army as high as 90,000. That said, Hammond noted that many of them would have been sailors and not infantry (Hammond 1968, 33).

Numbers aside, the two forces fought in a completely different way, which each side had perfected over decades, perhaps centuries, in their respective theaters of war. The Persian army was formed of contingents mustered from the furthest reaches of its vast empire, and though one might expect what was, in effect, a "multinational" force to adopt vastly different styles of fighting, ancient historians writing of the battle indicate there was a degree of standardization in their equipment. That said, it is possible the ancient historians who wrote of the battle, all of whom were Greek, decided to lump all Persian forces together by assuming one unit would have much the same equipment as the next, as was the case for the Greek soldiers. The Persian army that faced the Spartans and their Greek allies at Thermopylae was made up of infantry, cavalry and chariot units, each of them apparently equipped in a similar fashion. The infantry was what would be categorized by military historians as "light", thus not bearing heavy armor or weapons. Each individual Persian infantryman would be equipped with a light, short thrusting spear (which could also be thrown if necessary), a shortsword or saber, a light double-curved bow and a wicker shield. Shield sizes appear to have varied from unit to unit, but archaeological evidence from Persian sculpture seems to suggest that, generally speaking, the shields would cover the soldiers wielding them from knee to neck, while not being wide enough

to create significant overlap with the ranks on either side.

Wicker might seem like a foolish material to construct a shield out of, but it was in fact remarkably effective in its own right. The wicker was, of course, extremely light, making it very easy to wield, but it was also effective in stopping slashes from light weapons and could also trap thrust weapons that penetrated it, making them extremely hard to withdraw. The cavalry and charioteers also shared similar equipment, being armed with longer curved sabers for slashing, double-curved bows and javelins. It appears as though some units, particularly those from the Persian heartland, were also armed with double-headed axes, fearsome weapons which would have in all likelihood made them the Persian shock troops.

Armor for the Persian soldiers appears to have also been fairly standardized as well. This is because for much of the Persian infantry it was virtually non-existent. Though it's hard to imagine today, especially considering the Persians were going up against heavily armored hoplites, Persian soldiers appear to have worn no greaves, vambraces or any other form of arm or leg armor, and most units seem to have forgone helmets in favor of knotted rags about their heads, or light caps of metal or leather. To protect their torsos, the soldiers either wore nothing at all, or light back-and-breasts of leather, chain mail, or (very rarely) bronze scales. The elite Persian infantry, recruited from the Persian heartlands, and the famous "Immortals", the Emperor's 10,000 strong personal guard, might have been more heavily armored, but generally speaking they were far from protected.

The reasons for this extremely light equipment are simple: aside from the monumental cost of equipping such a massive army like the one the Persians fielded with heavy armor and weapons, they were simply not suited to the climate in which the Persian army conducted much of its operations. The scorching desert plains of Asia Minor and Egypt, the near-impassable mountains of Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush, and the sweltering heat of the Punjab were not battlefields suited for heavy iron, steel or bronze armor, which weighed soldiers down and, in such extremes of temperature, might well carry them off altogether from heatstroke or fatigue. Thus, the standard Persian tactic was to shower similarly lightly-armed opponents with waves of arrows and javelins from a distance before closing with the weakened ranks of the enemy and cutting them to pieces with their short swords and sabers. The cavalry and charioteers would also most likely fight in a similar fashion,

rather than in the knee-to-knee heavy cavalry charge of the middle ages or the Napoleonic battlefields more familiar to the West.

The Greeks, by contrast, fought in a vastly different manner. To begin with, while many of the Persian soldiers were conscripts (with the exception of some elite corps, like the Immortals, service in which was one of the greatest honors available in the Persian Empire), all of the Greek infantrymen were volunteers, and generally far better-trained ones. Each city-state required its volunteers to undertake city-wide annual or bi-annual military exercises, and the Spartans, the backbone of the Greek force, literally spent their entire life training and preparing for war, with manual labor entrusted to their serfs, the helots. It is not entirely clear why Sparta placed such a great emphasis on having a militaristic society, but it resulted in making military fitness a preoccupation for the Spartans from birth. Spartan babies with even the slightest hint of physical deformities were left to die, while the fortunate ones began their military training at the age of 7 years old. Every Spartan male had to join the army at 18.

Thus, the backbone of the Greek way of war was the citizen-soldier, and aside from some notable exceptions, like Boeotia, they fielded armies made up almost exclusively of infantry. While that might sound like a disadvantage against more diverse opposing forces that included archers or chariots, the Greeks weren't using just any infantry. Their main strength was the hoplite – a soldier about as different from his Persian counterpart as could possibly be.

Most historians believe that the hoplite became the dominant infantry soldier in nearly all the Greek city-states around the 8th century BCE Hoplites were responsible for acquiring their own equipment, so not every hoplite might have been equally armed, but considering the style of warfare, they needed as much uniformity as possible.

Like the Persian infantry, the hoplites also carried spears, but while the Persian weapons were short and light, the Greek spears were thick shafts anywhere between seven and nine feet long. These spears were topped by a 9-inch spearhead, with a "lizard-sticker" buttspike at the bottom which could be used as a secondary spearhead if the main weapon was snapped off, or to plant the spear upright when at rest. Each hoplite also carried a shortsword, designed specifically for thrusting in the close confines of a melee (the Spartan weapon, the *xiphos,* was so short as to be virtually a dagger, its blade barely over a foot long). Unlike the Persian infantry, the hoplites did not

carry bows. Though the Greeks did employ light infantry, in the form of slingers, javelineers and archers, their role was extremely secondary to that of the heavy infantry.

This was largely due to the armor which each hoplite wore into battle, which consisted of bronze greaves covering the wearer from ankle to knee, a skirt of leather or quilted linen to protect the groin area, and a heavy breastplate made either of bronze or quilted linen under overlapping bronze scales. To protect their heads, the hoplites wore the famous helmet that is perhaps their most iconic feature, a full-face bronze helmet with high flaring cheek-pieces and a thick nasal that obscured and protected their faces completely, topped by a horsehair crest that added another foot to their height. Helmets were worn front-to-back for line infantry and sideways for officers, to make them more recognizable to their own troops in the heat of battle.

Armored from head to foot in iron and bronze, the hoplite was the tank of his age, but the most important feature of his equipment was undoubtedly his shield. Weighing in at over 30 pounds, the *hoplon* or *aspis* was a great wooden bowl over three feet in diameter, made of heavy oak fronted with bronze and covering each hoplite from knee to neck, as well as providing a significant overlap with the shields of his companions in the battle-line. Obviously, these armaments did not lend themselves to the style of fighting the Persians favored. There could be no standing off and engaging the enemy at a distance with the Greek hoplites carrying short swords and thrusting

spears, and because of the weight of their equipment (which was up to 70-90 pounds all told),

Greek art depicting hoplites fighting

19th Century illustration of a Hoplite

For the Greeks, a hoplite was only as strong as the hoplite next to him; without hoplites on the sides, both flanks were exposed, and heavy infantry units are not mobile. Thus, the Greeks implemented the phalanx formation, one of history's most important military innovations. The phalanx was a line of infantry as wide across as the battlefield dictated, anything from five to 30 men deep, with each rank of men officered by a veteran. The formation also included an additional, expert file-closer at the back of each file, to keep the formation cohesive.

The phalanx advanced slowly to maintain its tight formation and unit cohesion, speeding up in unison just before reaching combat. The vast hoplite shields overlapped one another significantly, forming an uninterrupted wall of oak and bronze over which the first rank, while holding out their shields, would use their short swords to stab at the enemy in front of him, while the ranks immediately behind the first rank would slash at enemies with their spears over the top of the first line. Because each soldier's right flank was shielded by his companion's shield (all shields were strapped to the left arm, to preserve the integrity of the formation; left-handed fighters did not exist), the phalanx, especially in the case of less well-trained units, had a tendency to edge to the right, which the Greeks countered by placing their elite troops to the right as a bulwark. The rows in back of the first line would also use their shields to help hold up the hoplites in the front and help them maintain their balance. The formation and method of attack was designed to physically overpower the enemy and scare them, lowering their morale. The phalanx as a fighting unit fell out of favor by the height of the Roman Empire, but the principles behind it remained in use for subsequent infantry formations lasting past the American Civil War. As the Greeks relied on the hoplite to defend other hoplites and concentrate their attack, infantry units in the gunpowder age relied on concentrated gunfire to stun and scare the enemy. And as military commanders learned time and again throughout the ages, if soldiers were not packed shoulder to shoulder in a tight formation, they were far more likely to flee.

Ultimately, though this is a subject of some contention, much of the consensus argues that the main strength of the hoplite phalanx was its utter inexorability when it operated as a cohesive, immaculately drilled unit – an unstoppable juggernaut which relied less on the initial clash of shield-walls

(hoplites never advanced at a run, to preserve their formation) than on the relentless pushing force of their advance to shatter the enemy formation.

The first major decision that the Athenians would face was to either prepare the city's defenses for a siege or wait for help from other Greeks, such as the Spartans, to arrive. The other choice was to meet the much larger Persian force on the battlefield near Marathon. There was merit to both arguments, and in true Greek fashion both sides were heard, but ultimately it was the general Miltiades who swayed the opinion of the other generals to meet the Persians on the battlefield: "Amongst the Athenian commanders opinion was divided: some were against risking a battle, on the ground that the Athenian force was too small to stand a chance of success; others – and amongst them Miltiades – urged it . . . To Callimachus, therefore, Miltiades turned. 'It is now in your hands, Callimachus,' he said, 'either to enslave Athens, or to make her free and to leave behind you for all future generations a memory more glorious than even Harmodius and Aristogeiton left. Never in our history have we Athenians been in such peril as now. If we submit to the Persians, Hippias will be restored to power – and there is little doubt what misery must then ensue: but if we fight and win, then this city of ours may well grow to pre-eminence amongst all the cities of Greece' . . . Miltiades' words prevailed, and by the vote of Callimachus the War Archon the decision to fight was made." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VI, 109-110).

The Athenians thus decided to meet the Persians on the battlefield, and it is generally believed that they took the northern route from Athens to Marathon, which is about 25 miles long (Doegnes 1998, 7). The only other road to Marathon was slightly longer at about 28 miles and would have left the Greeks more exposed to a cavalry attack (Doegnes 1998, 7). After the Greeks arrived, the two sides faced each other in an uneasy calm that lasted for a few days before the battle, which helped the Greeks fortify their forces and better prepare for battle.

Once the Greeks arrived on the plain, they camped at a site that was considered to be sacred to the hero Hercules, and they were then joined by the Plataean Greek contingent. According to Herodotus, "The Athenian troops were drawn up on a piece of ground sacred to Heracles, when they were joined by the Plataeans, who came to support them with every available man."

The total number of Greeks who were camped at the plain near Marathon is

estimated to be around 10,000 total, with about 1,000 of the hoplites being Plataeans (Hammond 1968, 34). Although most of the Athenian hoplites traveled to Marathon to confront the Persians, a small skeleton crew stayed behind in Athens in order to defend the city in case the Persian forces split and part attacked the city (Hammond 1968, 34).

The Persians were eager to engage the Greeks in battle as they had the advantage with numbers and cavalry, but the Greeks were not yet done with their preparations that would help give them the ultimate advantage. In the days before the actual battle, the Greeks probably gradually advanced their position, felling trees along the way and then using those trees to obstruct the Persian cavalry (Hammond 1968, 39). Thus, by the time the Greeks had advanced to the actual battlefield, they tried to be protected in their rear and flanks by the rugged hillsides, which effectively made the Persian cavalry useless (Hammond 1968, 39). This strategy was a major factor in how the Greeks won the battle, because the vaunted and feared Persian cavalry played almost no role in the Battle of Marathon, and the Greek hoplites were much better armored and trained than the average Persian soldiers, who wore little armor.

In essence, Miltiades and the Greeks knew that in order to defeat the larger Persian army they had to plan accordingly and win the battle before the first blow was struck, while Datis became too reliant on his cavalry and was unwilling to improvise. Still, while the decisions made by Miltiades and Datis before the actual battle may have ultimately decided the victor, the two sides still had to fight, and it turned out to be an epic battle that has rightfully earned its legendary reputation.

The fact that the Athenian field marshal (War Archon), Callimachus, was on one of the wings instead of the center is another important aspect of the battle that will be discussed further below, but as the two armies met, the Greeks were forced to compensate for their numerical inferiority, so Callimachus, Miltiades and the other Greek generals were faced with a choice: concentrate their forces in the center (where the initial Persian thrust would probably be focused) or place the majority of their forces on the wings in order to prevent being flanked. According to Herodotus, the Greeks chose the second option: “One result of the disposition of Athenian troops before the battle was the weakening of their center by the effort to extend the line sufficiently to cover the whole Persian front; the two wings were strong, but

the line in the centre was only a few ranks deep. The dispositions made, and the preliminary sacrifice promising success, the word was given to move, and the Athenians advanced at a run towards the enemy, not less than a mile away . . . They were the first Greeks, so far as we know, to charge at a run, and the first who dared to look without flinching at Persian dress and the men who wore it; for until that day came, no Greek could hear even the word Persian without terror."

Perhaps the most interesting and strategically important aspect of this passage is the fact that the Greeks ran to meet the Persians. At first, one may think that running to meet the enemy on the battlefield would be disadvantageous, especially a mile away, because it could tire the runners out, but there are some advantages to the strategy as well. Combatants in pre-modern battles had to be in good physical shape given the nature of the hand-to-hand fighting, so a brisk run to meet the enemy would raise soldiers' heart rates and help get them in the proper frame of mind as the battle began. In effect, the mile or so that the Greek hoplites ran across the plain of Marathon to meet the Persian army was a warm-up for the main event, which was the actual battle.

Modern scholars have also pointed out that when the Greeks sprinted to meet the Persians, they eliminated one of the advantages that the Persians had: cavalry. Once the two armies became engaged and the Greek flanks were protected by the hilly terrain, the Persian cavalry threat was eliminated (Hammond 1968, 40). The other Persian advantage – numerical superiority – was countered by the Greek formation of the battle line, which would prove to be the ultimate undoing of Datis and his army.

However, once the battle began, it was not long before the thin Greek center collapsed. A burial mound that was discovered and excavated in modern times marks where the Greek center stood, and also where the Greeks suffered most of their casualties (Hammond 1968, 18). Herodotus' account tells how the Persians pushed through the center: "The struggle at Marathon was long and drawn out. In the centre, held by the Persians themselves and the Sacae, the advantage was with the foreigners, who were so far successful as to break the Greek line and pursue the fugitives inland from the sea; but the Athenians on one wing and the Plataeans on the other were both victorious . . . Drawing their two wings together into a single unit, they turned their attention to the Persians who had broken through in the center."

The wings were instrumental to Greek victory, as they essentially ceded the center to the Persians but then collapsed on their enemy from the wings. Herodotus, who had no military experience and was not well versed in military affairs, does not mention if the Greeks planned the maneuver in such a way, but logic would seem to indicate that they did. Up until this point in the battle, everything that Miltiades and Callimachus did was precise and well-thought out, from the road they took to Marathon, to where they chose to camp, and even the decision to sprint to engage the Persians. As such, it would be hard to believe that the Greek generals did not plan to collapse the wings as well. Hammond noted, "Now it is obvious that the action of the Athenians and the Plataeans on the wings, which were separated from one another by a considerable distance, had been preconcerted; for Miltiades, having thinned his centre and packed his wings, must have anticipated the actual developments in the fighting and issued orders in advance to the effect that the men on the wings, if and when victorious, were to turn towards the centre, to form line and to go to the aid of the Greek troops of the centre." (Hammond 1968, 29).

Hannibal's victory against the Romans at Cannae has often been considered the seminal use of a pincers attack of this type, and it is still considered a masterpiece of generalship that was imitated about 2,000 years later by Napoleon at Austerlitz, but if Hammond is correct, Miltiades and Callimachus orchestrated a pincers attack at Marathon centuries before Hannibal did. Either way, it's clear that Miltiades and the other Greek generals aided their cause and evened the odds by planning for contingencies. On the other hand, despite numerous advantages, Datis and the Persians were unable to capitalize on their superior numbers at the center of the line, and their cavalry was useless (Doenges 1998, 12).

Once the Greek flanks collapsed on the Persian center, Datis knew that phase of the battle was lost, so he ordered the Persians to retreat to the ships. Herodotus wrote very little about the Persian retreat other than that the Greeks captured seven Persians ships and that two Greek generals, Callimachus and Stesilaus, were killed pursuing the Persians (Herodotus, *The Histories,* VI, 114-115), but Pausanias helps fill in the gaps. He wrote that the disastrous Persian retreat may have been partially due to them not knowing the terrain and running into a marsh: "There is at Marathon a lake which for the most part is marshy. Into this ignorance of the roads made the foreigners

fall in their flight, and it is said that this accident was the cause of their great losses." (Pausanias, *Geography of Greece*, I, 32,7).

Achaemenid Persian historical records say nothing of the Battle of Marathon and little concerning the Greco-Persian Wars, which is not surprising since the Persian historical tradition was essentially inherited from other ancient Near Eastern traditions that depicted the sovereign as always victorious (Cameron 1983, 80-81). Even had the Persians followed more modern or Hellenic historiographical traditions, they still would have ignored their loss at Marathon due how lopsided it was. According to Herodotus, the final casualty count of the battle was 5,400 Persians killed, while the Greeks only lost 192 men.

After the Battle of Marathon, Darius I was not done with his punitive plans for Athens. According to Herodotus, the Persian loss at Marathon only incensed the Achaemenid king even more: "When the news of the battle of Marathon reached Darius, son of Hystaspes and king of Persia, his anger against Athens, already great enough on account of the assault on Sardis, was even greater, and he was more than ever determined to make war on Greece. Without loss of time he dispatched couriers to the various states under his dominion with orders to raise an army much larger than before; and also warships, transports, horses, and grain. So the royal command went round; and all Asia was in an uproar for three years, with the best men being enrolled in the army for the invasion of Greece, and with the preparations. In the year after that, a rebellion in Egypt, which had been conquered by Cambyses, served only to harden Darius' resolve to go to war, not only against Greece but against Egypt too." (Herodotus, *The Histories*, VII, 1).

King Xerxes I and His Court

As Darius's son, Xerxes was born of multiple noble lineages, a member of the revered Achaemenid family and direct descendent of Cyrus the Great himself, a strong connection in the Persian Empire. An exact date is unknown, but Xerxes was probably born around 518 BCE and grew up a prince in the Persian court, being trained and educated in the traditional manner. According to the ancient geographer Strabo, "From the age of five to twenty-four years they are taught to use the bow, to throw the javelin, to ride, and to speak the truth. They have the most virtuous preceptors, who interweave useful fables in their discourses, and rehearse, sometimes with sometimes without, music, the actions of the gods and of illustrious men. The

youths are called to rise before day-break, at the sound of brazen instruments, and assemble in one spot, as if for arming themselves or for the chase. They are arranged in companies of fifty, to each of which one of the king's or a satrap's son is appointed as leader, who runs, followed at command by the others, an appointed distance of thirty or forty stadia. They require them to give an account of each lesson, when they practise loud speaking, and exercise the breath and lungs. They are taught to endure heat, cold, and rains; to cross torrents, and keep their armour and clothes dry; to pasture animals, to watch all night in the open air, and to eat wild fruits, as the terminthus, acorns, and wild pears."[106]

No mention is made of whether these Persian youths learned to read and write since the Persian tradition was largely oral. Other individuals were employed for the purpose of reading and writing so it may very well be that they were not literate and had no need to be. After studying until the age of sixteen or seventeen, they took up service for ten years, training, fighting, and honing their skills by hunting in the times of peace. They would be available to be called up for military service for the next 25 years or so, until the time that they advanced into positions of advisement to the king, or in the case of Xerxes, as king.[107]

A depiction of Xerxes at the Hadish Palace in Persepolis

Darius reigned for 36 years and expanded the Persian Empire to its largest size, leaving a solid legacy behind him, but in late 486 BCE, he fell seriously ill and died around the beginning of December.[108] Xerxes rose to power much more smoothly than his father had, though some disputes still took place. Two different versions exist of the decision to make Xerxes king. Justin asserts that there was no confirmed heir, and that upon the death of Darius, his sons engaged in an argument, albeit a polite one, as to who should rule. “The princes maintained a completely fraternal attitude throughout the dispute; neither did the victor display haughtiness nor the vanquished resentment. Even during their quarrel, they sent each other presents and invited each other to feasts, where trust just as much as conviviality reigned.”[109] Eventually they went to their uncle, Artaphernes, brother of Darius, and asked him to decide the matter. He gave the throne to Xerxes.

Herodotus, meanwhile, wrote that it was the policy of the Persian king to name his successor before embarking on a campaign, and that Darius himself had named Xerxes heir, for not only had Darius recently gone to battle with the Scythians, but he was also planning a major campaign against Greece, a desire that Xerxes would inherit. Only four years before his death, Darius had sought to invade Greece, and he had proceeded with some success until finally suffering a devastating defeat at the Battle of Marathon and withdrawing back to Persia. Seething over the defeat, Darius had already begun to prepare for an even more massive invasion of Greece, which was briefly put on hold due to a revolt in Egypt, and then finally interrupted with his unexpected death.

Nevertheless, as he made his preparations, arguments had broken out between Xerxes and his half-brother Artobazanes, son of Darius by his first wife and the eldest child. Demaratus, exiled king of Sparta, advised Xerxes to push his claim on the grounds that, while he was not the eldest son, he was the first son of Darius after Darius had become king, and moreover he was a direct descendant of Cyrus, who had won freedom for all Persians, by his mother Atossa. Atossa similarly pushed for her son's confirmation as heir, and she still held great power over Darius and in the Persian court. Darius accepted his son's reasoning and his wife's urgings, and it seems he named Xerxes heir about a year before falling fatally ill.[110]

Interestingly enough, despite Herodotus's many criticisms of Xerxes, he still described the young prince as the obvious best choice for the throne. Other sources suggest possible contention between brothers, yet archeological evidence suggests that the decision was indeed made early and by Darius himself. This might give credence to the basics of Herodotus's version of events though his timing would likely be too late. In Persepolis, there is a relief carving ordered by Darius during his kingship which most scholars agree very clearly depicts Xerxes standing in the position of crown prince behind his father. Xerxes also indicates an early decision and easy succession in his own statement upon taking the throne: "Darius had other sons also; but thus was the desire of Ahuramazda: Darius, my father, made me the greatest after himself. When my father Darius went to his allotted place, by the favour of Ahuramazda I became king in my father's place."[111] He was likely about 32.

The relief depicting Xerxes as crown prince in Persepolis

The King of Persia was a particularly symbolic role, and as such, his appearance and interactions were all carefully orchestrated so as to maintain the necessary image. The position was said to be divinely given by Ahura Mazda, and the position was not only the undisputable head of the political order, but also the figurehead of religious order as well. The king's status was infinitely higher than any other individual. As it was said by Pseudo-Aristotle, the king was invisible to all, dwelling in a wondrous palace within a fence gleaming with gold and amber and ivory…the majesty of the Great King falls as far short of that of the God who possesses the universe, as that of the feeblest and weakest creature is inferior to that of the king of Persia."[112]

Though not technically thought to be a god, Xerxes was considered the next best thing to it, and the Persian manner of doing reverence to their king is sufficient evidence of this. Upon entering the presence of the king, it was customary to prostrate oneself on the floor in abject humility and worship. The Greeks termed this action proskynesis, and as members of democratic systems, they abhorred it, considering it an affront to all free men. This

attitude caused conflict between the two peoples on more than one occasion. Herodotus described a visit to Xerxes by a group of Spartan ambassadors: “After they had gone up to Susa and had come into the presence of the king, first when the spearmen of the guard commanded them and endeavoured to compel them by force to do obeisance to the king by falling down before him, they said that they would not do any such deed, though they should be pushed down by them head foremost; for it was not their custom to do obeisance to a man, and it was not for this that they had come.”[113]

Similarly, it caused serious outrage among the Macedonian conquerors of Persia some generations later when Alexander the Great decided that his men, Greek and Persian alike, should engage in proskynesis upon coming into his presence. Though a monarchy, with a king holding ultimate power of decision, the Macedonians maintained a unique kind of equality between king and nobles. The men of high-ranking families grew up at court with Alexander and became his close friends, generals, and advisors all in one. These men would hunt, exercise, and eat together and even called the king by his first name. It was a situation that utterly confused the Persians upon the Macedonians’ arrival in their empire - they could not comprehend the level of familiarity or Alexander’s tolerance of it.

In one well-known instance, after Alexander had captured Darius’s family and was meeting his mother for the first time, the woman accidentally addressed Hephaestion, Alexander’s closest friend, as king, and did honor to him. It was an understandable mistake, for unlike Persian royalty, the two were dressed almost identically, with no ostentatious garments marking Alexander as king. Additionally, according to Diodorus, Hephaestion was taller and more handsome than his friend and king. Upon realizing the mistake, the Persians were mortified, expecting Alexander to exact terrible retribution on the poor woman, but Alexander simply laughed and said, “Never mind, Mother, for actually he too is Alexander.”[114]

However, as he ventured further into Persia, Alexander embraced and enjoyed the Persian customs more and more, including the gesture of proskynesis. When he tried to institute it among his Macedonian generals and soldiers, he met with resistance, mutiny, and even assassination attempts.

Persians met with resistance to the prostration from Jewish culture as well. Cyrus took the city of Babylon during the Jewish exile and allowed the banished Jews to return home to Jerusalem. Yet some remained, and even

climbed in office. Cyrus even gives note to his acceptance of multiple religions on the inscriptions of the Cyrus Cylinder, and Jewish citizens were allowed to practice their beliefs. One of these was the conviction that they should only bow before their God, but proskynesis was expected from those of lower rank to higher rank as well, not even just the king. In the Book of Esther in the Bible,[115] Mordecai, the father of Esther, incurs the wrath of Haman: "All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honor to Haman, for the king [Xerxes] had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor… [Haman] was enraged."[116]

The same text gives details regarding how one sought an audience with the king, which was one of the primary duties that Xerxes held throughout his territory. The Persian Empire was vast and subsequently contained multiple capitals, so Xerxes would spend spring in Persepolis, summers in Ecbatana in the cool mountainous regions of Media, and autumn and winter in the far warmer Susa or Babylon. During the year, and while traveling from place to place, he might also have stayed in the capitals of his satraps. He would sit on a throne of gold and silver facing the entrance doors and surrounded by his officials and courtiers. Biographer Richard Stoneman noted, "The 'treasury relief' from Persepolis shows (probably) Xerxes seated on his throne, hair curled and topped by his distinctive smooth crown and holding his sceptre in his right hand and, in his left, a bunch of lotus flowers. His golden throne is accompanied by a matching footstool, both with bull's feet, and he sits under an ornamental canopy or baldachin. Behind him stands the crown prince Darius with several courtiers: one, probably a eunuch, with his head wrapped in a bashlyk and carrying his towel of office; the second is in Median costume and carries a bow case and an ornamental axe, as well as on his belt a dagger in a scabbard certainly of gold like that in the Oxus Treasure – a trove of gold objects from the Achaemenid period. Behind these officials stand two soldiers in Persian dress with cylindrical hats. Before the king are positioned two small pillars with curious pyramidal objects on top: these may be small fire altars, or perhaps incense burners."[117]

Admittance to the king did not come in any particular order or through any qualifications, but was rather a matter of attracting attention and warranting an invitation. In the Book of Esther, it is mentioned how Mordecai waited for many days by the king's gate and overheard a conspiracy planning the

assassination of Xerxes, reported it to Esther, and so received great honors. When Mordecai asked Esther to plead to Xerxes on behalf of the Jews, she reminded him that, despite being Xerxes's Queen, "all the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: he is to be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold scepter to him and spare his life."[118] Xenophon similarly mentioned these customs, speaking of the Spartan general Callicratidas who spent two days at the gates seeking an audience. Xenophon indicated that "to this day the Asiatics under the Great King wait at the door of their rulers."[119] Even those who were not actively seeking an audience but were close officials of the king would remain by the gates in the event that he required their presence.

Though certainly lesser known individuals would be brought in after begging audience at the gates of the Great King, the officials who passively awaited his summons formed the majority of his interactions and relationships. In addition, he had two military units to guard him, king's bodyguards and an elite group of soldiers known as the Immortals. These 1,000 men held that title due to the organization of the unit, and when any one member fell, he would be replaced immediately, maintaining the complement always at 1,000. In addition to these guards, the homes of the king's top generals surrounded his royal palace, at least at Persepolis and perhaps in the other cities of royal residence as well. The generals were not only military leaders, but formed the bulk of the king's advisory committee as well, along with several viziers, nobles and princes unrelated to military positions.

Darius held a "council of seven," perhaps a reference to the seven conspirators who had placed him on the throne, but no evidence exists as to whether Xerxes continued this council of seven, privileged princes or not. He may well have, for it is also likely that this group of seven was formed by one representative from each of the seven noble houses of Persia as Darius and his fellow conspirators were. Many of these generals and advisors were not only linked to the king by trust and regard, but also through marriage. Another high honor was to be considered the "king's friend," and this was usually expressed through gift giving, lavish gifts of money, gold, silver, expensive furniture, clothing and tents, and ornate tack for noble horses. The

only men worthy of these sorts of adornments were those to whom the king had gifted them, and so they were a very visible status symbol, not as a sign of wealth as happens in many cultures, but an even higher mark, that of being a favorite of the Great King. Xenophon notes that “we are familiar to this day with the open-handedness of Oriental kings. There is no one, indeed, in all the world whose friends are seen to be as wealthy as the friends of the Persian monarch: no one adorns his followers in such splendor of rich attire, no gifts are so well known as his, the bracelets, and the necklaces, and the chargers with the golden bridles. For in that country no one can have such treasures unless the king has given them.”[120]

Another common sight in the Persian court was eunuchs, men who were castrated at a young age. Sometimes this was done to make them desirable sexual consorts for other men, but it was often done for position. Eunuchs held a unique role in the Persian court, approaching that of a slave, yet not seen as such by their lords and employers. In fact, they were often hailed for their deep loyalty, and the theory behind the castration was related to this. The idea was that a castrated man would have no distractions, no sexual desires, and no wife or children to distract him from business or split his loyalties. Of course, the downside was that several eunuchs of history, having no other motivations in life, became increasingly ambitious and motivated by power. A eunuch named Bagoas was involved in the assassination and replacement of more than one king until he helped Darius III take the throne. The new king, knowing how Bagoas had made and destroyed kings in the past, had him put to death before he could repeat the cycle yet again.

A regular job for a court eunuch was the care of the royal children.[121] In fact, years later, after his defeat at Salamis, it was with his most trusted intimate, a eunuch named Hermotimus, that Xerxes sent his wife and children for the journey home. They similarly had the charge of ordering the chambers of the king and his family and protecting and caring for the women of the court, presumably due to the trust that they would not attempt sexual advances toward them. They would even act as chaperones for visitors to the women, overseeing all interactions.[122]

Much of the king’s socialization was spent with those who came to him for audiences, yet mealtime also included a massive number of courtiers, advisors, and “friends,” even up to as many as 15,000 guests, all served on golden plates and in golden cups. One such dinner, given by Darius II while

in the field on campaign against Alexander, not even in the comfort of his own home, included 277 cooks, 29 kitchen assistants, 13 cooks specializing in dairy products, 17 drink preparers, 70 wine filterers, and in addition 329 concubine musicians, 46 chaplet weavers and 40 perfumers. All the serving staff were freshly bathed and dressed all in white."[123]

Preparations for War

As appears to have happened with many great sons of great fathers, including Alexander some years later, Xerxes appears to have reigned much in the shadow of his father, both in the accomplishments that his father achieved and the intentions that Darius held for his future conquests. The death of Darius left his great invasion hanging, ready to be undertaken, and yet Xerxes could not immediately step into the leadership role and carry the plan out. His first focus had to be the revolt in Egypt.

Few details are included in the accounts of the campaign, which may indicate that it was fairly uneventful and easy. There may also be some indication that Xerxes did possess abilities on the battlefield even though they eventually proved to be insufficient against the Greeks. Upon retaking Egypt, Xerxes appointed his full brother, Achaemenes, to rule Egypt, which he did for about 20 years and for the remainder of his life. He was eventually killed by insurgents in a rebellion about a year after Xerxes's death.

Another serious rebellion broke out in Babylon shortly after Xerxes's ascension to the throne. Its origins are unknown but may have been associated with raised taxes. The events of the rebellion are also ambiguous, for the story is set with two different men in two different time periods. According to Herodotus, Zopyrus, Darius's general, back in 522 BCE, disfigured himself for a ruse. "Making light esteem of himself, he maltreated his own body in a manner which could not be cured; for he cut off his nose and his ears, and shaved his hair round in an unseemly way, and scourged himself."[124] Showing his mangled features to the Babylonians, he told them that he had incurred the anger of Darius and wished to join them. In pity for his condition and eagerness for a skilled ally, they invited him and his troops into the city. Unfortunately for them, he had not defected at all, and the soldiers who accompanied him were Darius's royal army. Babylon was taken, 3000 citizens killed, and Zopyrus was made governor where he served until he was killed in the rebellion of 484 BCE, led by a man named Bêl-šimânni.[125]

Ctesias told a similar story, but in his version, Zopyrus was already the governor of Babylon and was murdered at the outset of the rebellion, whereupon his son, Megabyzus, was the one who cut off his own nose and ears and so earned the trust of the Babylonians. A grateful Xerxes then presented Megabyzus with a golden millstone, “which is the most esteemed royal gift of all amongst the Persians.”[126]

With Babylon secured, pressure was reasserted on Xerxes to avenge the defeat of Marathon and the Athenian sacking of Sardis. Though later authors, particularly those of dramatizations, characterize the decision to attack Greece as one of insanity, a careful inspection of less biased ancient sources reveals better motivations. Certainly the losses at Marathon and Sardis were great dishonors that begged for a reply. Moreover, the great Darius had already planned and began organizing the invasion, and it is very likely that his legacy weighed heavily on Xerxes, just as Philip’s legacy and intended invasion of Persia pushed Alexander to pursue his father’s intentions in the early years of his reign.

Herodotus suggests other, more specific and nuanced motivations. One voice that was particularly in favor of the campaign was Xerxes’s cousin and general, Mardonius. Apparently he ambitiously sought the governorship of Greece, and as such he encouraged Xerxes to implement the invasion through a variety of arguments, including the incorrect belief that Greece was a fertile and prosperous land. He also claimed the conquest would increase Xerxes’s reputation, and that it would send a warning to regions in the empire considering rebellion. In addition, the exiled Athenian family known as the Peisistratids suggested the attack, hoping that they would be placed back into power. They gathered oracles and soothsayers with favorable prophecies and brought them before Xerxes, including one who spoke of a man of Persia building a bridge across the Hellespont. Ambassadors from Thessaly had offered a political invitation for Xerxes to take Greece. It would seem a perfect opportunity to expand his empire and take control of land that he felt should belong to Persia.[127]

When all had been settled in Babylon and Egypt, Xerxes gathered all of his top advisors to hear their opinions on the matter of invading Greece; Mardonius pitched his case fiercely and with flattery, exhorting Xerxes, "Master, thou dost surpass not only all the Persians who were before thee, but also those who shall come after…a strange thing it would be if, when we

have subdued and kept as our servants Sacans, Indians, Ethiopians, Assyrians, and other nations many in number and great, who have done no wrong to the Persians, because we desired to add to our dominions, we should not take vengeance on the Hellenes who committed wrong against us unprovoked. Of what should we be afraid…it is true that the Hellenes make wars, but (as I am informed) very much without wise consideration, by reason of obstinacy and want of skill: for when they have proclaimed war upon one another, they find out first the fairest and smoothest place, and to this they come down and fight; so that even the victors depart from the fight with great loss, and as to the vanquished, of them I make no mention at all, for they are utterly destroyed… Who then is likely to set himself against thee, O king, offering war, when thou art leading both all the multitudes of Asia and the whole number of the ships? I for my part am of opinion that the power of the Hellenes has not attained to such a pitch of boldness."[128]

Having spoken what all knew Xerxes wished to hear, none expected that any in the assembly would dare to contradict him. Yet Xerxes's uncle, Artabanus, stepped forward and advised against the invasion, on the grounds that it was of far greater risk to undertake than the possible reward to be gained should Persia emerge triumphant. Xerxes was enraged at his uncle's words, yet for the sake of family, he would take no action against him. Still, he decreed that Artabanus would be forced to endure the shame of remaining behind in Persia with the women and elderly while the men marched to Greece.

Later, having cooled his temper, Xerxes showed his more rational mind, for he reconsidered the advice of his uncle and realized its sound logic. He was prepared to change his plan when, according to Herodotus, he had a dream, and afterward Artabanus had the same dream, in which the gods told him he should, indeed, go to Greece.[129]

For the next four years, Xerxes oversaw careful preparations to lay the foundation for his invasion, an act of solid foresight and deliberation that belies the Greek opinion of him as a rash and hasty king. Most impressive was at Athos, where Darius's fleet had been wrecked previously. Xerxes ordered a canal dug across an isthmus of 12 furlongs in length, and wide enough for two triremes to sail through it side by side. It was a stretch of land either flat or with only small hills, but still a massive undertaking in the ancient world to remove so much earth and form a sea lane directly through

it. Herodotus explained, “When the channel became deep, those who stood lowest dug, while others delivered the earth as it was dug out to other men who stood above, as upon steps, and they again to others when it was received, until they came to those that were highest; and these bore it away and cast it forth.”[130] Once the men completed the digging of the canal, they were set to work on a bridge to cross over the river Strymon.

Meanwhile, all of Persia was busy with preparations, including gathering ropes for the intended bridges over the Hellespont, collecting vast amounts of food and water to provision both his army and the huge baggage train of families and retainers that would follow it, and providing for the pack animals hauling it all. Drops were made of these supplies in strategic locations along the intended route to the Hellespont so that they would be ready for the army and not needed to be carried. Such caches of food were even left on the other side of the Hellespont, carried over by boat and left in Thrace, Tyrodiza, Doriscos, Eion, and Macedonia.

The entire strength of the Persian army marched to assemble in Sardis in the spring of 481 BCE. Sardis was the endpoint of the royal road that linked it all the way back to Susa, a main artery of the Persian Empire, and Sardis was the city taken by Athens during the revolt of Miletus and burned. The sack of Sardis was a key driving factor in the invasion of Greece.

Another interesting incident, one that allows some speculation as to the individual character of Xerxes himself, occurred while he was in the region of Lydia. There, he and his followers were magnificently entertained by Pythius, the son of Atys, who was second only to Xerxes in his wealth. He received the king personally and willingly offered to supply money to help fund the invasion. Impressed, Xerxes asked how much wealth Pythius had to offer, and Pythius answered honestly. When he had done so, Xerxes replied how pleased he was that Pythius had offered, he being the only man to have offered any private means to the Persian cause, and rather than taking the gold offered him, Xerxes actually gave money to Pythius instead, naming him a friend of the king.[131] Though it was merely a mild gesture between two men of such great wealth, the story at least indicates that Xerxes had an eye for generosity as he had been taught from childhood, and that he did not suffer from greed and avarice to hoard his possessions and his gold. Where he could have obtained more money, he instead chose to give some away as a reward for the virtuous behavior of another man.

However, shortly thereafter, he also had the opposite reaction to Pythius despite the respect that had been earned by the Lydian and demonstrated the more violent and ruthless aspect to his character. As they were preparing to depart, Pythius came again before Xerxes and asked that he be granted a request, to which Xerxes, still flushed with gratification toward the man, answered that he would be glad to do so. Pythius went on to say that he had five sons, and he asked that Xerxes release from his service and from the invasion the eldest of his sons, that he may ensure an heir and a continuation of his family. Xerxes responded in a rage, "'Thou wretched man, dost thou dare, when I am going on a march myself against Hellas, and am taking my sons and my brothers and my relations and friends, dost thou dare to make any mention of a son of thine, who art my slave, who ought to have been accompanying me thyself with thy whole household and thy wife as well? … thou shalt receive not thy desert but less than thou deservest: for thy gifts of hospitality shall rescue from death thyself and the four others of thy sons, but thou shalt pay the penalty with the life of the one to whom thou dost cling most.' Having answered thus, he forthwith commanded those to whom it was appointed to do these things, to find out the eldest of the sons of Pythios and to cut him in two in the middle; and having cut him in two, to dispose the halves, one on the right hand of the road and the other on the left, and that the army should pass between them by this way."

Xerxes's army marching from Susa consisted of 60,000 soldiers not including the 1,000 Immortals, the elite unit of king's guards, and 9,000-10,000 cavalry. With so many men, using ferries to cross all the rivers along the route, let alone the Hellespont itself, would have taken up to a week each. Arriving at last in Sardis, at the least 90 days after departure, puts their arrival in the autumn of 481. From there, Xerxes sent the famous heralds to Greece, asking for earth and water as a sign of submission to him, and instructing the cities to prepare food and water to have the king as a guest. The only cities that he did not contact were Athens and Sparta, for he had no intention of sparing those two, regardless of how they received him. The message was a good tactical move, putting the Greek states on edge and making it more likely that they would surrender willingly and welcome him. Later he made another such decision by sending letters to all of the Greek states in which he hinted that the other states were turning toward his cause, and each best do so or risk facing him alone.

The army wintered in Sardis, gathering even more soldiers from the surrounding regions, and in the spring of 480 BCE, were ready to march on Greece. Herodotus makes the claim that the army had 1,700,000 men, but modern historians expect that was a wild exaggeration. More recent estimates put the number closer to 200,000, but it was still a vast army for the era, one of the largest formed to that date. Each unit was formed by nationality, for otherwise communication among the many languages and dialects would have been too difficult, and that might have caused disaster in the heat of battle. At the same time, that meant that units often did not have a cohesive fighting style, spearmen were mixed with bowman and sword wielders, and worked less effectively as a group. Stoneman explained, "Besides the Persian and Median sections of the army, clad in colourful sleeved tunics and trousers, felt caps and fish-scale armour, and each carrying bow and arrows as well as a spear and a dagger, with a wickerwork shield for protection, there were dozens of other ethnic groups represented. Kissians (or Elamites) and Hyrcanians (from Gurgan) were armed in a similar way to the Persians. The troops also included Assyrians, Bactrians, Scythians and Indians, Areians (from the Herat region), Parthians and Chorasmians (from east of the Aral Sea), Sogdians (from modern Uzbekistan), Gandarians (from Gandhara in Pakistan), Caspians and other central Asian groups. There were Arabians with long bows and dressed in zeiras – which resembled the modern gallabiya, but fastened at the waist with a belt. The Ethiopians made a vivid sight, dressed in leopard- and lion-skins, with their bodies painted half white and half yellow, and carrying bows two metres long and arrows tipped with stone instead of bronze. The Libyans wore leather and carried javelins. Numerous groups from Asia Minor were similarly armed with javelins and daggers, small shields, plaited helmets and sturdy boots. Lydians, Greeks from Ionia and Mysians all carried javelins, as did the Thracians (who must have joined the army after the crossing of the Hellespont), who wore deerskin clothing (not surprisingly in that region) and brightly coloured zeiras. There were also troops from the Black Sea region. Herodotus probably had access to a list from the Persian archives, since his information is so detailed."[132]

Xerxes and his army eventually departed from Sardis, marching on to the Hellespont where ongoing work had been preparing bridges for the crossing of the seven furlong stretch of water. The fleet, consisting of 1,207 triremes, a total of 3,000 ships in all, had already assembled in the strait. Herodotus

described the scene: “And seeing all the Hellespont covered over with the ships, and all the shores and the plains of Abydos full of men, then Xerxes pronounced himself a happy man, and after that he fell to weeping. Artabanos his uncle therefore perceiving him…asked as follows: ‘O king, how far different from one another are the things which thou hast done now and a short while before now! For having pronounced thyself a happy man, thou art now shedding tears.’ He said: ‘Yea, for after I had reckoned up, it came into my mind to feel pity at the thought how brief was the whole life of man, seeing that of these multitudes not one will be alive when a hundred years have gone by.’"[133]

The idea is one quite consistent with ancient Persian attitudes, a melancholy at the fleeting existence of man and a frustration with the limitations of a human life. This philosophy may itself have contributed to Xerxes’s reasons for invading Greece, the desire to push the boundaries of life and to leave behind a legacy beyond the short span of years each individual lives. Artabanus’s response to Xerxes adds the tragic knowledge that not even every life is happy. He also told Xerxes that he is dreadfully fearful for Xerxes and his army, terrified that Xerxes is putting all his trust in his preparations and not giving any thought to the disaster that can befall any expedition simply from the interference of nature and distance, in this case, land and sea.

The concern is, indeed, a valid one, and indicates a large portion of what may have been Xerxes’s eventual downfall: an over-reliance on logistics and preparation, and an underappreciation for tactics, both in the wider sense of army movements and in tight situations on the battlefield. Despite his years of careful preparations and insurance that his army could move as it must, would not go hungry, and consisted of a huge, overwhelming force, Xerxes seems not to have fully understood that “to invade by sea upon a perilous coast, being neither in possession of any port, nor succored by any party” was a dangerous and ultimately doomed endeavor.[134]

Persian Median Elamite Parthian Arian Bactrian Sogdian Choresmian Zarangian Arachosian Sattagydian Gandharan Hindush Saka haumavarga
Saka tigraxauda Babylonian Assyrian Arab Egyptian Armenian Cappadocian Lydian Ionian Overseas Saka Skudrian Ionian with shield-hat Libyan Ethiopian

A Persian depiction of different army units by ethnicity

Even though he was building bridges, he was still undertaking a sea invasion. The Hellespont was vulnerable to attack by sea, and the bridges themselves were formed out of the ships of the fleet. The plan was for two bridges, each created by lashing a series of ships together from Abydos to Bigali, about 5,000 feet. It was not the very narrowest point of the Hellespont, but the section with the most favorable currents. They were tied together with cables made on site and consisting of flax and papyrus woven into ropes, and then wooden planks stretched between the decks to create an uninterrupted road capable of handling humans, horses, pack animals, and the carts they hauled. Unfortunately, just after its first completion, the sea that Artabanus so feared first struck, as a violent storm ripped the bridges apart and destroyed the cables.

In frustration, Xerxes ordered the execution of the chief engineers, and then decided on a very odd disciplinary move according to Herodotus. He “bade them scourge the Hellespont with three hundred strokes of the lash and let down into the sea a pair of fetters. Nay, I have heard further that he sent branders also with them to brand the Hellespont. However this may be, he enjoined them, as they were beating, to say Barbarian and presumptuous words as follows: ‘Thou bitter water, thy master lays upon thee this penalty, because thou didst wrong him not having suffered any wrong from him: and Xerxes the king will pass over thee whether thou be willing or no; but with

right, as it seems, no man doeth sacrifice to thee, seeing that thou art a treacherous and briny stream.’"[135]

It could be that these stories are inventions of the Greeks, meaning to show the hasty temper and the insanity of the man they deemed their enemy, yet there still might be some truth to them as well, coming out of the belief that the Persian ruler commanded not only men and women, but the land and elements as well. Furthermore, since the king was chosen by the gods, anything that worked against him could well be considered the work of demons, particularly saltwater, contaminated intentionally by the forces of evil. Perhaps the move was symbolic, or perhaps it had less to do with the scourging of the sea and was instead directed at spirits or demons believed to be dwelling there. It is easy, when coming from another cultural background, to dismiss things one cannot understand as being the result of instability, just as the Greeks did so many centuries ago, but it is important to attempt an understanding from the mindset of the culture that the individuals inhabited. It would seem from the sources that the king’s behavior did not elicit any particular comment from his soldiers. It may not have been recorded if it had, or they may have feared retribution, but Herodotus made no mention of the Persians finding Xerxes’s behavior odd or off-putting. It may well be that the Persians understood his orders and his reasons behind them.

It was a significant setback, but work began again immediately repairing and replacing the structure. When it was finally completed again, the army began to move across it, taking seven days by Herodotus’s account, though some historians wonder if it must have taken longer, even up to a month. Proceeding into the region of northern Greece and Macedonia, the Magians performed a rather disturbing ritual at the River Strymon, sacrificing white horses and nine local boys and girls, who were buried alive in order to call down good omens for the campaign.[136] Xerxes’s fleet had been sailing from the Hellespont all the while that the army marched through northern Greece, eating vast banquets and bankrupting the locals although the Persian supply lines seem to have been sufficient so that Xerxes had no need to worry over food and water for his soldiers. The land and sea forces reunited at Thermae and proceeded south into the heartland of Greece.

The Second Persian War

As had happened before and would again be repeated, the Greek city-states struggled to engage in decisive action. Though they greatly valued their

democracy and independent states, the arguments in assemblies and bustling about to form treaties created dangerous delays. Indeed, that same democracy and subsequent hesitation eventually caused the downfall of Athens when faced with the unhindered movements of King Philip II of Macedonia.

However, Athens did display a strong front, and convinced the other city-states that had not already joined the Persians to stand their ground as well. Herodotus guessed that had Athens faltered and capitulated, the remaining cities would have deserted to the Persian cause as well, leaving Sparta alone to defend Greece. He therefore credits Athens with saving Greece, and certainly with some merit, but at that moment in 480 BCE, it was the Spartans, the only city still under a monarchy, able to make an executive decision and stand to defense. Even though Spartan rituals decreed that the army could not go out during the festival that was occurring, King Leonidas defied the ruling and took 300 of his best warriors, joined by approximately 5,000 voluntary reinforcements from the cities they marched through, and took up position in the narrow pass at Thermopylae in a desperate attempt to slow the Persian advance. Most knew that they could not hope to defeat the Persian army there, but hoped that if enough time was gained, the remainder of the Greek states could prepare themselves for full scale warfare.

Upon encountering the small number of Greeks standing against his mighty host, Xerxes could not believe that they would actually fight, even when he was assured of the fact multiple times by Demaratus. Instead, he waited four days at the entrance to the pass, firmly believing that the Greeks would abandon their positions and run, terrified at his army. He did not understand that they had already prepared themselves for death, and despite having no hope of victory, were resolved to fight to the last man. He sent word to the Greeks, demanding that they surrender their arms, but Leonidas replied, “Come and get them!” On the fifth day, Xerxes finally grew frustrated, and he sent his men to engage the Greeks. The first fight lasted the entire day, and many Persians were slain, boxed in in the bottleneck of the pass and fighting against an army with nothing to lose. At the end of the day, as Herodotus put it, the Greeks “made it evident to every man, and to the king himself not least of all, that human beings are many but men are few.”

When the line could not be broken, Xerxes sent in his Immortals, the elite 1,000 soldiers, expecting them to easily win the pass, but once again the narrow pass made their superior numbers useless, and the Greek phalanx,

using longer spears than the Persians, proved impenetrable.

The third day went the same, and Xerxes had begun to wonder how to break through when Ephialtes the Malian betrayed a small goat path that flanked the Greek forces. The Persians were able to follow it and come up upon the Greeks from behind, but they did not slaughter the entire remaining force, for King Leonidas had sent away the other allied soldiers to preserve their lives for a later battle. Thus, only he and his Spartans and Thespians held the pass at Thermopylae.

At the outset of the day, one Persian force moved around by way of the pass while the others engaged with the Spartans as before. In this fight, many fell on both sides, but particularly among the Persians. The pass was so narrow that at one point men were being pushed off it and falling down the cliff to their deaths. Those who came into combat with the Spartans found themselves fighting fierce enemies who expected death and fought the stronger for it. Two of Xerxes's brothers fell in the battle. King Leonidas was killed also, and his men fought viciously to recover his corpse. Eventually, however, the flanking force came around, and the remaining Greeks were slaughtered.[137]

Meanwhile, the Persian fleet had also struggled, being hit by heavy winds, taking serious damage, and becoming scattered and disoriented. After the storm had raged for three nights, 400 triremes and uncounted supply ships had been utterly destroyed. The Greek fleet, dominated by Athenian ships and consisting of only 271 vessels, was stationed near Thermopylae to prevent the Persian ships from rendezvousing with their army. When they met the Persians for battle, they were heavily outnumbered, but like the Greek army at Thermopylae, they used tactics to their advantage, forming a tight circle, bows outward, which the Persians could not break. The fight raged throughout the day, and at night, another storm hit, battering the already demoralized Persian fleet. The Battle of Artemision went on for another two days, and though it was technically a victory for the Persians, it was rather pyrrhic in nature, for they had lost far too many ships and men for the slight advantage that they had earned. Plutarch wrote that even 600 years later, there was a point "on the shore, sea sand all about it, which supplies from its depths a dark ashen powder, apparently the product of fire, and here they are thought to have burned their wrecks and dead bodies."[138]

The land army continued south, determined to reach Athens and take

revenge. They ravaged the countryside, killing men and women at temples along the way, and eventually reached Athens. The Athenians fought hard in defense, but their numbers were far too few, and the Persians took Athens and razed it to the ground, burning all of the temples in particular. Though almost all of the citizens had been evacuated, except a few who still mounted a desperate defense, as Richard Stoneman wrote, “for the Greeks this must have been the most cataclysmic event of the whole campaign – the complete destruction of a city already adorned with spectacular temples and statues, though nothing like those that arose in the aftermath of the war. It was the first wholesale destruction of buildings and property on Greek soil.”[139] A century later, the sack of Athens still grieved the Greeks, and Alexander the Great destroyed much of Persepolis in revenge for that devastating act.

During the next engagement at Salamis, the Greeks were again able to use the landscape to their advantage, luring the Persian fleet into a small strait which negated the Persian numerical superiority and gave the skilled Athenian navy a chance to fight. Another interesting character insight emerges from this battle. Before engaging in the battle, Xerxes called his top commanders for a council, asking their opinions on whether he should fight there. All answered in the affirmative, with the exception of one, Artemisia, the only female commander. The Queen of Caria, she had personally brought her five ships to support the Persians and bravely spoke up advising caution against the Greek navy. Herodotus wrote that some of those present were fearful that Xerxes would punish Artemisia with death, and some no doubt hoped for it, jealous of her success and infuriated by the presence of a female leader. The Greeks, in fact, were equally indignant, and had offered a reward of 10,000 drachmas to any who killed or captured her. Yet Xerxes was far from angry. In fact, he was pleased at her courage to speak out, though he still chose to take the advice of the other commanders, much to his detriment.

The fleets met at Salamis, and soon it became evident that the Persians would be defeated. Realizing the futility of the battle, Artemisia resolved to get out alive, but she was blocked by the oncoming Persian ships and hotly pursued by an Athenian one. With nowhere to go, she determinedly rammed one of her own ally‘s ships, sinking it and opening a gap in the line through which she could escape. The Athenian ship, deciding that she was either Greek or defecting, abandoned the chase, though they may not have had they known who commanded it. Watching from the cliffs overlooking Salamis,

Xerxes could not well distinguish the various enemies and allies, but he could recognize Artemisia's standard flying on her flagship. Supposing that she had sunk a Greek vessel, Xerxes cried out, "My men have become women, and my women men."[140]

After the battle, when Xerxes again consulted his commanders, Artemisia once more spoke contrary to what the king may have wished to hear, advising that Xerxes withdraw back to Persia. This time he listened, for he had no other good alternative. Too many of his ships were lost, and even with his whole fleet, maintaining his massive army through the winter in Greece would have been next to impossible. Without them, it was unthinkable. Furthermore, the entire kingdom was at risk if Xerxes were to fall.

The king returned to Persia, though a force was left in Thessaly for the winter under Mardonius, intending to finish the job when spring came. Unfortunately, Mardonius was soundly defeated by the Greeks at Plataea, and the second invasion of Greece came to a humiliating conclusion. Even worse was the retreat back through Greece - without the necessary supplies, many of the army died on the march to Thessaly, others fell through the ice in the River Strymon and drowned, and according to Herodotus, when the army finally came out of dire starvation and was fed at the city of Abydos, many overate and died even then as a result.

Xerxes's Final Years

When studying Thermopylae, it is too easy to think of Xerxes's failure to take Greece as his defining moment and the beginnings of the collapse of his rule, yet such a theory could not be farther from the truth. Xerxes reigned for another 15 years after returning home from Greece, and he did much of his best work in that time. While he may not have taken Greece, he did successfully sack Athens, and his consuming focus was subsequently broken. Instead, he found a new campaign, now of architecture, and transformed the city of Persepolis into the jewel of the Persian Empire.

Building projects had begun in the city under Darius and continued after under Artaxerxes, but Xerxes was responsible for most of the buildings and the most improvements on the site, though after the destruction wrought by Alexander and the Macedonians, it never regained the same splendor. Diodorus wrote of the Persian capital, "It is not inappropriate to speak briefly about the palace area of the city because of the richness of its buildings. The citadel is a noteworthy one, and is surrounded by a triple wall. The first part

of this is built over an elaborate foundation. It is sixteen cubits in height and is topped by battlements. The second wall is in all other respects like the first but of twice the height. The third circuit is rectangular in plan, and is sixty cubits in height, built of a stone hard and naturally durable. Each of the sides contains a gate with bronze doors, beside each of which stand bronze poles twenty cubits high; these were intended to catch the eye of the beholder, but the gates were for security. At the eastern side of the terrace at a distance of four plethra is the so-called royal hill in which were the graves of the kings. This was a smooth rock hollowed out into many chambers in which were the sepulchres of the dead kings. These have no other access but receive the sarcophagi of the dead which are lifted by certain mechanical hoists. Scattered about the royal terrace were residences of the kings and members of the royal family as well as quarters for the great nobles, all luxuriously furnished, and buildings suitably made for guarding the royal treasure."[141]

Diodorus was describing the city with relation to its sack by the Macedonians, going on to say that it "was the richest city under the sun and the private houses had been furnished with every sort of wealth over the years…many of the houses were abundantly supplied with furniture and wearing apparel of every kind. Here much silver was carried off and no little gold, and many rich dresses gay with sea purple or with gold embroidery became the prize of the victors. The enormous palaces, famed throughout the whole civilized world…Persepolis had exceeded all other cities in prosperity."[142]

Persepolis was a city vast and wondrous. The palace was a huge structure of columned porticoes and halls, all made of shining black marble and surrounded by intricate gardens. Great temples dotted the city, and many of the great stone walls were covered in skilled relief carvings. The palace was of such intricate beauty and vast expanse, without even considering the other buildings surrounding it, that it would be impossible to go into enough details, but Robert Stoneman effectively summarized the luxury and magnificence of Persepolis: "The Persepolis [Xerxes] built was the expression of everything that Achaemenid royalty stood for: the king throned in splendour in his golden halls, watched over by the farr or royal fortune symbolised by the man in the winged disc; the assemblage of peoples bringing gifts from every corner of his vast empire; and above all the grace of

Ahura Mazda by which the king exercised his rule. Around the edges of the palace were the settlements of the people who lived and farmed there, the workers who maintained the palace, while the houses of the nobles, as Diodorus tells us, filled the further edges of the platform. All the people who lived there derived their existence in some way from the palace. Xerxes was proud of his achievement: 'Me may Ahura Mazda together with the gods protect, and my kingdom, and what has been built by me.'"[143]

It was, in truth, only in his later years that Xerxes' hold on his empire began to slip. He engaged in an affair with his niece, and when his wife learned of it, she tortured, mutilated, and killed the niece, which sent her husband into a rebellious rage. That compelled Xerxes to track him down and have him killed as well, but the incident hurt his authority at the Persian court.

Around the same time, Greek powers were expelling Persian garrisons on the northern side of the Hellespont and eventually into Asia Minor. Xerxes tried to bring an army against them, but they were soundly defeated. Bactria rebelled soon after, and soon his own courtiers and officials considered him incompetent and sought his downfall. A prefect of Xerxes named Artabanus (not his uncle) convinced the eunuch who served as chamberlain to the king's bedroom to conspire with him, and the two burst into Xerxes's room and stabbed the king in his bed.

In order to secure his safety and hopefully remove Xerxes's sons from succession, thereby receiving the crown himself, Artabanus went to Artaxerxes and told him that Darius had murdered their father. Artaxerxes subsequently killed his elder brother, only to learn too late of his mistake and of Artabanus's treachery, but once he realized the man's intent, he had him put to death and his sons arrested.

Forming an accurate picture of the character of King Xerxes can be a daunting task. Not only was his reputation heavily marred by biased Greek sources responsible for most of the records regarding him, but the official court façade and the symbolism that accompanied the King of Persia often cloud the issue. However, Xerxes's actual actions seem to suggest a more moderate evaluation of the king is necessarily. He was certainly a man who consulted his advisors, and though he may have found it frustrating to be contradicted, used as he was to his position and rightful blessing of the gods, he was reasonable enough to consider all opinions, even those contrary to his

own. His deliberation over his uncle's caution prior to the invasion of Greece provides evidence of this, even though it was necessary for him to wait for his temper to cool.

Several instances indicate that he possessed a quick temper when pushed, such as his reaction to Pythios requesting that his eldest son be exempt from service and also his treatment of King Leonidas's corpse. Although Persians were traditionally very conscious of burial rites and respected honorable enemies, Xerxes demanded that Leonidas's corpse be decapitated and crucified, a testament to his fury at the Spartans and their king. Yet, tempting as it may be to see that as a ruthless act of an uncontrolled temper, it may well have had basis in a fully understandable grief. Herodotus mentions that during the Battle of Thermopylae on the second day, Xerxes rose from his stool in consternation three times, in terrible fear for his army. By the end of the battle, an estimated 20,000 Persians lay dead around him, including friends, top commanders, and two of his brothers. Who would not react in anger at such a sight?

His meticulous preparations for the campaign in Greece show his ability for detailed logistics, one half of the necessary qualifications for a great commander. Unfortunately, he failed in the other half, battle tactics. When consulting with his commanders before Salamis, it is telling that he did not punish Artemisia for her honesty despite the obvious expectation of that from others in the party. Even prior to his invasion, a deputation of Spartans had come to him in Susa, offering their lives as a payment for the Persian heralds that the Spartans had murdered which ran contrary to the laws and code of honor of the era. Xerxes refused to kill them, partly out of an unwillingness to allow their atonement, but also out of respect and admiration for the men who had voluntarily offered up their lives. Far from being a religious zealot, he appears to have practiced the tolerance for which the Persian Empire earned its reputation. He offered sacrifices to many gods, including Athena and other Greek deities, and did not destroy temples at random in cities that had surrendered to him.

Despite all of these admirable acts, he still possessed the capacity for cruelty and callousness, such as his retaliation against Pythius, but here again, cultural aspects must be considered, and one story in particular perhaps best embodies the strange balance of god ordained, symbolic king, and the man beneath it. During the retreat back to Persia from Sardis, Herodotus wrote

that Xerxes boarded a boat for a portion of the journey. When the seas grew rough, the commander informed him that the boat was too heavy, and promptly announced to the other passengers that here was their chance to save their king. In a testament to the position and reverence of the Persian king, a large number jumped overboard and drowned, and the captain was able to bring the ship safely to shore. Xerxes rewarded the man richly for saving his life, and then ordered him executed for causing the deaths of so many Persian citizens.

This dichotomy of motivations shows very clearly the symbolic importance and duties of the king, and while many speak disparagingly of Xerxes for his supposedly cowardly retreat from Greece, in Persia, the life of the king was so integral to the survival of the kingdom that he undertook the only possible course of action. In the final analysis, Xerxes was likely as complex and nuanced as any other person, and if anything about him was out of the ordinary, it is likely because his position as the most powerful leader on the planet required extraordinary actions and choices few would ever have to make.

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[1] Information regarding early society and customs comes largely from the religious texts of the *Avesta* and the *Rig Veda*. See Bibliography for full citation and where to access these ancient texts.

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[115] Whether one is or is not a Christian, in this instance, the Christian Bible contains useful historical information, whatever the truth of the characters described. The King in question is Xerxes, and historians agree that the author of the book was intimately familiar with the ways and customs of the Persian court. While the dates and individuals may not be counted upon with absolute certainty, the book of Esther contains useful details of the culture surrounding its narrative.

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